

ROUTLEDGE

THE PHILOSOPHY OF GEORG SIMMEL

Frederick C. Beiser

THE PHILOSOPHY OF GEORG SIMMEL

In this ground-breaking work, Frederick Beiser argues that Georg Simmel was one of the foremost yet overlooked philosophers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While Simmel's work was crucial in laying the foundations for sociology, his several books, including *The Philosophy of Money*, were deeply philosophical. Simmel's doctorate was on Kant's philosophy and his intellectual outlook was greatly influenced by his lifelong love of philosophy.

It is this philosophical Simmel that Frederick C. Beiser, a renowned scholar of German philosophy, explores in this fascinating and important book. Beginning with a helpful overview of Simmel's early intellectual life, Beiser considers the formation of Simmel's sociology and his views on ethics, before examining his theories of historical knowledge; the arguments contained in his most important work, *The Philosophy of Money*; the role of Kant's philosophy in his thinking; his critique of pessimism and his philosophy of religion. The second part of the book explores the deeper philosophical importance of Simmel's work, by considering his theories of the method and essence of philosophy, the philosophy of life and his important work on aesthetics.

An outstanding and pathbreaking book, *The Philosophy of Georg Simmel* will be of interest to students and researchers in philosophy and sociology alike, particularly those studying 19th-century philosophy and the history of sociology.

Frederick C. Beiser is a Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Syracuse University, United States. A renowned scholar of German philosophy and German idealism, his work has garnered many prizes and awards. He has been a Thyssen and Humboldt research fellow, a 1994 Guggenheim fellow, an

NEH faculty fellow, and he won the 2015 *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Book Prize for *The Genesis of Neo-Kantianism 1796–1880*. He received the German Order of Merit for his work on German philosophy. His many books include *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* and *The Romantic Imperative*. Two of his books, *Hegel* and *The Berlin Antisemitism Controversy*, are both published by Routledge.

"Frederick Beiser is one of the most competent and fertile intellectual historians of Germany and German philosophy. His erudition is unsurpassable. He writes with great force, confidence and clarity, and is remarkable for his ability to transmit and translate a very intricate world of German philosophical ideas to the Anglophone reader in a lucid and accessible way. In this respect his new book on Georg Simmel is no exception, and it was a pleasure to read and learn from it."

Efraim Podoksik, *Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel*



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Frederick C. Beiser

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PREFACE

The primary task of this book is to understand Simmel, the philosopher, to provide an analysis of his main philosophical works, from his first to his last. I intend to see Simmel as he saw himself: namely, as a philosopher. The study of Simmel as a sociologist has been not only overdone: it is anachronistic and it covers only a small portion of his work. It is only when we approach Simmel as a philosopher that we can recover his entire *œuvre*. Even Simmel's work as a sociologist was meant to be philosophical.

I make no plea for Simmel's contemporary relevance. This book attempts to reconstruct Simmel in the context of his own time and as he understood himself. Whether this is still of contemporary interest the reader has to judge.

The task of rediscovering Simmel as a philosopher has already been undertaken in the United States and Germany. See Elizabeth Goodstein, *Georg Simmel and the Disciplinary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017) and the articles in *Der Philosoph Georg Simmel*, eds, Gerald Hartung, Heike Koenig, Tim-Florian Steinbach (Freiburg: Karl Alber Verlag, 2020).

The stimulus for writing this work I owe largely to Gerald Hartung and Melanie Riedel.



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INTRODUCTION

0.1 A Philosopher, First and Foremost

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) is best known today, alongside Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, as one of the founders of modern sociology. For generations, especially in the Anglophone world, most scholarly work on Simmel has focused on his contributions to sociology.[1] It is strange to say, however, that his reputation rests on a misconception. It is not that his work in sociology is of any lesser importance, or that he has been overrated as a sociologist. The problem is that Simmel did not conceive himself as a sociologist. He understood himself first and foremost as a philosopher; sociology was for him a sideline. He stressed this point in a revealing letter he wrote to Célestin Bouglé, the disciple of Emile Durkheim, on December 13, 1899:

> It is to some extent painful to me that I am known abroad only as a sociologist—because I am a philosopher, and see my life's task in philosophy and I do sociology only as a sideline. When I have fulfilled my commitment to the latter, when I finally publish a comprehensive sociology—something I will do in the coming years—I probably never again will return to it.[2]

1 See David Frisby, *Georg Simmel*, revised edition (London: Routledge, 1984); Nicholas Spykman, *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel* (New York: Atherton Press, 1966); Pitirim Sorokin, *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956); Theodore Abel, *Systematic Sociology in Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929); Samuel Koenig, *Man and Society* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1957); and R.A. Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (London: Heinemann, 1967).

2 Simmel to Célestin Bouglé, December 13, 1899, GSG XXII, 342.

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This disavowal of sociology was not singular or temporary. Several years later, when writing his *Soziologie*, Simmel reaffirmed his commitment to philosophy; at the same time, he revealed his growing distance from sociology. This is how he wrote Georg Jellinek in December 1907:

> Once this work [*Soziologie*] is finished, it is improbable that I will return to sociological studies; the sociological existence of my life will then be concluded; I will dedicate the rest of my life to philosophy, in which I persuade myself I still have something to say, and in which my heart belongs to something quite different than sociology.[3]

Nothing could bring Simmel to doubt his resolve. Six years later, he was still adamant that he should *not* be considered a sociologist. When, in August 1913, Robert Michels, an Italian sociologist, invited him to be a contributor to a *Handwörterbuch der Soziologie*, Simmel declined his request; and on the following grounds:

> …I have lost every practical interest in sociology for years now. It has always been only a side interest; my heart belongs always to philosophy; and in the few years I have left of my complete powers…I need every moment to devote myself to philosophical things, which are latent within me, and of which I have the opinion that they will be of interest to some people. In sociology, I have fundamentally nothing new to say; but in philosophy I still hope to have something.[4]

All these letters should confirm beyond any doubt that Simmel conceived himself as a philosopher rather than a sociologist. But this commitment to philosophy is really not surprising. After all, Simmel had been educated in the discipline. As a student in Berlin in 1876, he had registered in the philosophy faculty; he then devoted the rest of his student years to philosophy. His M.A. dissertation and his habilitation thesis were on a very philosophical subject: Kant.

Simmel then devoted the rest of his career to philosophy. He was a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Berlin from 1885 to 1912, and then a professor of philosophy at the University of Strassburg from 1914 to 1918. During these years, his lectures almost entirely concerned philosophical topics. It was only a brief portion of Simmel's career that was devoted to sociology, the years from the late 1890s until 1908. After that, he returned fully to his philosophical interests, declining to become president of the *Sociologischer*

3 Simmel to Jellinek, December 23, 1907, GSG XXII, 598.
4 Simmel to Robert Michels, August 6, 1913, GSG XXIII, 201.

Verein. These facts are so basic and well known, it is hard to understand how Simmel became known as a sociologist.

Yet for his reputation as a sociologist, Simmel himself was largely to blame. Since the 1890s, Simmel had been devoted to sociology. When, in February 15, 1894, Célestin Bouglé enquired about the future direction of his work, he replied:

> …I am devoting myself entirely to sociological studies, and for the foreseeable future I will not enter any other area, namely not moral philosophy.[5]

Still, it is not that the 1894 letter marks a change in Simmel's self-conception. He always conceived his interest in sociology as philosophical because he was concerned primarily with the philosophical foundations of that discipline. Simmel had little interest in empirical sociology, in pursuing research into historical facts and figures. It was always conceptual problems that preoccupied him. So, even when Simmel was involved with sociology, it was mainly for philosophical reasons. He was always a philosopher, first and foremost.

0.2 The Aesthetic Interpretation

Not all scholars have recognized the importance of philosophy in Simmel's writings. Some persist in seeing him as a sociologist,[6] while others stress the aesthetic dimension of his work, as if Simmel were primarily a kind of artist.[7] This latter group of scholars have been especially influential. They note that Simmel, unlike Durkheim, did not attempt to develop "an orthodox causal-analytical method" for his sociology, and for this reason they conclude that Simmel really had no methodology at all.[8] These scholars have been impressed by Simmel's failure to provide a systematic exposition of his ideas, by his persistent tendency to write in essays, and by his detachment from his subject matter. They see these characteristics of Simmel's writing as part and parcel of his aesthetic approach to intellectual life. Because of his style of writing, his aesthetic attitude and his skepticism, these scholars have stressed

5 See Simmel to Célestin Bouglé, February 15, 1894, GSG XXII, 112.

6 See Gregor Fitzi, "The Philosophical Meaning of Simmel's Sociological Work", in *Der Philosoph Georg Simmel*, ed. Gerald Hartung (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, 2020), pp. 85–110, here p. 88.

7 See David Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism: A Reassessment of Georg Simmel's Social Theory*, second edition (London: Routledge, 1992); and Sibylle Hübner-Funk, "Ästhetizismus und Soziologie bei Georg Simmel", in *Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel*, eds. Hanes Böhringer and Karlfried Gründer (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976), pp. 44–58.

8 Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism*, p. 101.

that his intellectual work is basically anti-intellectual, anti-systematic and anti-academic. They have emphasized the following features of Simmel's work: "his conscious essayism, his preoccupation with the fragmentary, his tendency not to reveal himself in his writings, his aestheticisation of reality and distance from it and the centrality of the work of art as a model for his own essays".[9]

The father of the aesthetic approach to Simmel's writings was Georg Lukács, who, in an influential essay, described Simmel as "the true philosopher of impressionism".[10] Simmel's devotion to the fragmentary, anti-methodological and the anti-systematic came, Lukács believed, from his philosophical convictions and practice, which he characterized as "impressionism". He defined impressionism as "the protest of life against forms" because forms unduly restrict and repress creativity. Lukács' approach to Simmel has been followed by David Frisby, who has provided a more detailed and systematic account of it.[11]

There is a terrible blind spot in this approach to Simmel. This appears in the blatant *non sequitur* in the reasoning behind it: that because Simmel did not develop a "causal-analytical" method for his sociology, he really had no methodology at all. Granted that Simmel did not have or practice such a method—he repudiated it in his early writings—it does not follow that he had no method at all. As a matter of fact, Simmel did have a method, and it is staring in the face all those who deny he had one. That method is precisely what we should expect from Simmel's own account of his writings: it is the *philosophical* method. It is false to think that this method is too generic or too simple to be a demanding and precise method. All who know philosophy know it to have the most rigorous and demanding method of all disciplines. Simmel provides his own account of this method in his late work *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*.[12] He stresses the following features of this method: (1) questioning all assumptions, not admitting any dogmatic, fashionable or customary assumptions in an argument; (2) reconstructing the reasoning of a thinker from within, so that one can see the reasons for all the steps in his argument; (3) knowing the problem the author was trying to resolve and seeing whether or not he resolves it from his own premises; (4) an analysis into necessary and sufficient conditions; and (5) finding the general within the particular from an analysis of the particular. It is no exaggeration to say that

9 Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism*, p. 78.

10 Georg Lukács, "Erinnerungen an Simmel", in *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel*, Zweite Auflage, eds. Kurt Gassen and Michael Landmann (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1993), pp. 171–176.

11 See Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism*, as in note 7.

12 Georg Simmel, *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*, GSG XIV, 11–12.

Simmel applies all or various aspects of this method in all his major works. If this is so, we can safely bury the reputation of Simmel as an anti-intellectual.

When applied to Simmel's writings, Lukács' concept of impressionism is a mistake. In his *Lebensphilosophie*, Simmel argued for the necessity of form as an integral factor of life; form was for him controlling and limiting, to be sure, but he also believed that it was necessary to give life meaning and purpose. Of course, he thought that, on a lower level, form would be broken through by the forces of life, but form would then be reasserted on a higher level, so that it could accommodate all the forces of life below it. This dialectic of form and content, where both are necessary but complementary, is the central theme of Simmel's *Lebensphilosophie*. It is impossible to claim that one alone—whether form or content—is representative of Simmel's philosophy as a whole.

The aesthetic approach to Simmel's writings has concentrated especially upon his preference for the essay form. This is said to be the source of the fragmentary and anti-systematic in Simmel's writing. It has been pointed out that even Simmel's *Soziologie*, which appears to be a massive treatise, is really an anthology of essays written on previous occasions; they do not cohere together to form a single argument or approach. Adorno, a favorite of Simmel scholars, wrote that the essay did not play by the rules of the game, that it refused to give precise definitions of basic concepts and suspended the normal rules of method.[13]

Yet it is difficult to see anything intrinsically irrationalist in the essay form. The philosophical method applies as well to an essay as it does to a book. An essay can play by the rules of the academic game just as much as a treatise. An essay can even be systematic if it defines its subject matter precisely and exhausts what is to be said about it.

Another feature of Simmel's writings stressed by his critics is his tendency to begin an essay with some paradox or antinomy.[14] In the essay on *Philosophische Kultur*, for example, nine of the thirteen essays begin with some paradox, polarity or contradiction. This style is attributed to Simmel's anti-intellectualism because, it is said, these contradictions or paradoxes are never really resolved.[15]

Beginning an essay with such a motif is a commonplace of philosophical writing, not least because the resolution of paradoxes and contradictions is standard philosophical business. It is simply false to say that Simmel leaves these paradoxes and antinomies unresolved; in one form or another, they are

13 Theodor Adorno, "Der Essay als Form", in *Noten zur Literatur, Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), XI, 17–19. Adorno is cited by Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism*, pp. 71–72.

14 Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism*, p. 73.

15 Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism*, p. 74.

indeed usually resolved. Of course, Simmel does not believe that there is only one way of resolving them; but such relativism does not make him an anti-philosopher, just a sophisticated philosopher.

0.3 Life

All good history of philosophy involves biography. It is only by knowing the life of a philosopher that we know his intentions, his reasons for writing and why his thinking might have changed. For just this reason, the history of philosophy confronts a dire obstacle in the case of Georg Simmel. We know very little about his life. His early interests, opinions and experiences are a mystery to us. We know much more about the lives of Herder or Schiller in the 18th century than the life of Georg Simmel in the 20th century. This is because his library, documents and correspondence have disappeared; before they could be shipped to the United States, they were confiscated and auctioned by the Gestapo in 1939. A similar fate befell the *Nachlass* of Hermann Cohen.

After the war, a search was made for Simmel's *Nachlass*, but it was unsuccessful.[16] What we know now about the life of Georg Simmel is collected in volumes 20–24 of the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*. But there are huge gaps in the correspondence and much missing manuscript material. For many years, it is impossible to know what Simmel was thinking, feeling or doing.

Besides the *Gesamtausgabe*, there are two further sources about Simmel's life. One is the recollections of his son Hans Simmel,[17] though these are more about the Simmel family than his father. The other is the recollections of Simmel's friends and students collected by Kurt Gassen and Michael Landmann in 1958: *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel*.[18] These tell us much about Simmel's lecturing style, habits and personal life. The picture they provide is, however, a composite lacking all unity.

The following brief sketch of Simmel's life is taken from the above sources.[19]

Simmel's grandfather, Isaak Simmel, who was from Dyhernfurth in Schlesia, was a successful businessman. He immigrated to Breslau where he

16 According to Michael Landmann, in May 1939, two containers (*Lifts*), bearing the numbers H.S. 1065 and 2028, were sent by the firm Barr, Moering & Co. to Hamburg. They were placed in the harbor; but before they could be put on a ship, they were confiscated by the Gestapo. See *Buch des Dankes*, p. 14.

17 Hans Simmel, *Lebenserinnerungen, Simmel Studies*, 18 (2008), 9–136.

18 See note 10.

19 For a fuller biography, see Jörn Bohr, "Leben", in *Simmel-Handbuch*, eds. Jörn Born, Ferald Hartung, Heike Koenig, and Tim-Florian Steinbach (Berlin: Metzler, 2021), pp. 3–25; and Michael Landmann, "Bausteine zur Biographie", in *Buch des Dankes*, pp. 11–33.

eventually received citizenship in 1840. His son Edward, who was Georg's father, was born in Breslau in 1810. He too was a businessman; he converted from Judaism to Catholicism in 1835. In 1838, he married Flora Bodstein, who was also from a Jewish family in Breslau, but she converted to Protestantism. Edward moved to Berlin were he founded the chocolate firm "Felix & Sarotti", but which he eventually sold.

Georg Simmel was born March 1, 1858 in the very heart of Berlin, at the corner of Friedrichstrasse and Leipzigerstrasse. He was the youngest of seven siblings, one brother and five sisters. Simmel's brother, Eugen, who was a book dealer in Leipzig, died young. Simmel's father died in 1874. His guardian was Julius Friedländer, who was a music publisher and the editor of the Peters Edition of music scores. Simmel was attached to Friedländer and travelled widely with him. Friedländer bestowed his fortune upon Simmel, which gave him an independent income for much of his life, and which made it possible for him to pursue an academic career. Simmel's doctoral dissertation is dedicated to Friedländer.[20]

In 1890, Simmel married the daughter of a government official, Gertrud Kinel, whom he had met at the home of his friend Botho Graef. Along with Richard Salinger and Wilhelm Fabian, Graef was one of the opponents at the defense of Simmel's dissertation. Gertrud was baptized a catholic, following her father, but was raised a Protestant, following her mother. The marriage of Georg and Gertrud bore fruit in Hans, who later became a professor of medicine in Jena. Gertrud was herself an author, and wrote books on philosophy, religion and education.[21] Together, Georg and Gertrud ran a literary salon in Berlin, which became a meeting place of the intellectual elite in Berlin.

Simmel also had an illegitimate child, Angela Kantorowicz, the daughter of Gertrud Kantorowicz.[22] Simmel refused to see her and she grew up entirely with foster parents. Gertrud was one of Simmel's closest students and colleagues: she attended all his lectures, travelled with him on vacations, made translations for him and had endless discussions with him. She was a writer in her own right, working mainly in the field of Greek art.[23] Persecuted by the Nazis, she died in Theresienstadt in April 1945.

Simmel's academic career was marked by remarkable success and extraordinary failure. He became a very popular lecturer, a star attraction at

20 The dedication reads: "*Meinem väterlichen Freunde Julius Friedländer in Dankbarkeit und Liebe gewidmet*".

21 Gertrud Simmel, *Vom Sein und vom Haben der Seele* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1922); *Realität und Gesetzlichkeit im Geschlechtsleben* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1920); and *Über das Religiöse* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1919).

22 On Gertrud Kantorowicz, see Gerald Hartung, in *Simmel-Handbuch*, pp. 443–446.

23 Her work on Greek art was published posthumously by Michael Landmann. *Vom Wesen der griechischen Kunst* (Heidelberg: L. Schneider, 1961).

the University of Berlin, where he normally filled the largest lecture halls. His writings were also very successful. In just ten weeks in 1910, for example, he sold 130,000 copies of his *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*. Yet, despite such achievements, Simmel found it impossible to ascend the academic ranks. He had habilitated in 1885, but he remained a *Privatdozent* until 1898, when the Berlin faculty finally promoted him to *Professor Extraordinarius*; but even then, his position was unsalaried and he had no right to examine doctoral students. To have been kept in such a lowly rank for so long, despite his many writings and popularity, was undoubtedly humiliating. The reasons for Simmel's failure to gain earlier promotion are not known; there has been much speculation about the causes: anti-Semitism, jealousy of his popularity and mistrust of the field of sociology. Simmel was finally offered a full professorship in 1914 at the University of Strassburg, but [Again, no French spelling] was a provincial posting, a backwater of German academia.

Simmel did not adjust easily to Strassburg. He felt isolated and alone. He had few colleagues there, and he did not have the huge following he had in Berlin, chiefly because the onset of the war in 1914 took away most of the eligible students. Simmel felt that the world of his generation was rapidly disappearing. He no longer felt any sense of belonging. On January 28, 1914, he wrote Margarete von Bendemann: "In Strasburg there are important and consequential tasks to perform; but I do not have the feeling that they are *my* tasks".[24]

When the war came, Simmel passionately supported the German cause. He felt that Germany's sheer existence was at stake. He was too old to fight, but he volunteered when he could: he worked at the post-office; he helped with the Red Cross; and he gave lectures to soldiers. But in 1917, he became disillusioned. There had been two catastrophes in German history, he said,[25] one was the 30 years' war, the other the government of Wilhelm II.

Simmel died on September 28, 1918, of liver cancer. His doctor advised him months before his forthcoming end, so he was at least able to finish his last work, his *Lebensanschauung* just before his death. Simmel died content, feeling that life had given him much and that he had tried to give in return.

24 GSG 23, 287.
25 *Buch des Dankes*, p. 13.

1

EARLY EDUCATION

1.1 University Years

From 1871 to 1876, Simmel attended the Friedrichs-Werderschen Gymnasium in Berlin, a traditional humanist school founded by Friedrich Wilhelm I in 1661. Simmel demonstrated his talents early. He took the *Abitur* examination in 1876, in which he proved to be the "*zweitbester*" of his class.[1] He also wrote an essay on Goethe, for which he won a prize of 10 thalers.[2] With such a background, there was no question that Simmel would gain entrance at the university. Accordingly, in April 22, 1876, he registered as a student at the Friedrich-Wilhelms University in Berlin.[3] Until 1914, Simmel's life and career would revolve around this university.

Simmel first registered at the university as a student of history.[4] In the Summer Semester 1876 he took a course on modern history from Johann Gustav Droysen; and in the Winter Semester 1876/77 he heard lectures by Theodor Mommsen on Roman epigraphy and by Heinrich von Treitschke on German history. Also in the Winter Semester 1876/77, Simmel attended Droysen's lectures on Greek history and continued to hear his lectures on modern history. His interest in history continued in the Summer Semester 1877 when Simmel heard Mommsen lecture on the history of Rome since Diocletian, and Hermann Grimm lecture on the history of the Italian Renaissance. Later,

1 Abiturienten des Friedrichs-Werderschen Gymnasiums am 5 April 1876, GSG XXIV, 164.
2 Verleihung der Witteschen Preise des Friedrich-Werderschen Gymnasiums am 2 November 1875, GSG XXIV, 161–164.
3 Inskription an der FWU Berlin vom 22 April 1876, GSG XXIV, 179.
4 See Zeugnissen der Vorlesungen, GSG XXIV, 173.

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in the Summer Semester 1879, Simmel will listen to Grimm lecture on Raphael and Michelangelo. Grimm's lectures were important for Simmel's later interest in art history and aesthetics. Simmel's *Nebenfach* for his studies in Berlin was Italian literature, which he studiedunder Grimm and Adolf Tobler.

It is first in the Winter Semester 1877/78 that a remarkable shift appears in Simmel's interests: he moves away from history and toward philosophy and psychology. He now attends lectures by Friedrich Harms on logic and metaphysics, by Moritz Lazarus on psychology (a subject scarcely distinguishable from philosophy in the 1870s), and by Adolf Lasson on the history of aesthetics. Then, in the Winter Semester 1878/79, he took Eduard Zeller's course on psychology and the history of philosophy. This move toward philosophy is attested in the records of the university.[5]

What accounts for this change in interest? It is Simmel's apparent realization that the study of history requires more of a foundation, a basis to be found in psychology and philosophy. So much seems to be the implication of some lines of the *Vita* that he submitted with his doctoral dissertation: "*Ut autem quod inest in historia magni atque difficilis accuratius intellegerem, psychologiae studium amplexus sum auspiciis virorum clarissimorum Lazarus et Bastiana psychologia profectus totum philosophiae genus auctoribus summis viris Zeller et Harms diligentius tractare coepi…*".[6]

What especially stands out in the list of lectures Simmel attended in Berlin is his interest in the lectures of Johann Gustav Droysen. It was not only Lazarus and Bastian who would help him understand universal history: it was first and foremost Droysen. In the Summer Semester 1878, he heard only one set of lectures: those of Droysen on the *Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*.[7] These were Droysen's pioneering lectures on historics, i.e., on the epistemological foundations of history. This would be a crucial background, indeed foundation, for Simmel's later interest in the philosophy of history.

After five years, from April 1876 until May 1880, Simmel left the University of Berlin. His *Abgangszeugnis*,[8] which testified to his time spent there and the courses he took, was dated May 29, 1880. It stated that he had devoted himself to the study of philosophy. Regarding his conduct,

5 Abgangszeugnis der FWU Berlin von 29 Mai 1880, GSG XXIV, 172. The certificate simply says that Simmel "*der Philosophie beflissen hat*".

6 The *Vita* is reprinted in Michael Landmann, "Bausteine zur Biographie", in *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1993), p. 15. On this important passage, see Klaus Christian Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), pp. 36–37.

7 Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik, Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Peter Leyh (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann Verlag, 1977).

8 Abgangszeugnis der FWU Berlin vom 29 Mai, 1880, GSG XXIV, 172–174.

the certificate stated simply and bluntly "nothing disadvantageous is to be noted".

1.2 A Prize Essay

On August 3, 1879, the philosophy faculty in Berlin announced a prize contest on Kant's views on the nature of matter. The faculty described the contestants' task as "*Darstellung und Beurteilung Kants Ansichten über das Wesen der Materie*". Simmel entered the competition, finishing his contribution in May 1880. There were six contestants, who, to ensure impartiality, submitted their contributions without their names. The essays were judged by Eduard Zeller, the famed historian of philosophy, who bestowed first prize on Simmel's contribution. Zeller praised the thoroughness and care of the treatment of Kant's views; but he believed that the exposition would have gained greatly in clarity if the author had prefaced the whole with a comprehensive investigation of Kant's fundamental concepts. Despite this shortcoming, Zeller still deemed it the best contribution.[9] For his prize, Simmel could receive a gold coin worth 25 ducats or the equivalent sum in money. It is not known which he chose.

Simmel's prize essay, "Darstellung und Beurteilung von Kants verschiedenen Ansichten über das Wesen der Materie", has not survived. We know only its first part, which Simmel submitted for his doctoral dissertation. This part was published in 1881 under the title *Das Wesen der Materie nach Kants Physischer Monadologie*.[10] This writing is a careful German paraphrase and critique of the Latin text of the 13 propositions of Kant's *Monadologia physica*.[11] Throughout Simmel points out the fallacies in Kant's arguments, which he charges with vagueness or begging the question. One fundamental criticism is repeated constantly: that although Kant analyzes a power into its relations, he still hypostasizes it as the subject of these relations.[12] According to Simmel, Kant is on the verge of his critical view that a power consists only in its relations. Kant's vacillation on the ontology of power is "a sign of a spirit struggling for truth against every trace of dogmatism".[13]

The critique of Kant's hypostasis was a redolent theme for Simmel. It was a Kantian critique of Kant himself. In the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* Kant declared that hypostasis was the fallacy of pure reason. Simmel will absorb this

9 Königl. Preis der FWU Berlin: Gutachten Eduard Zellers über die philosophischen Preisschriften vom Juli 1880. GSG XXIV, 176.

10 *Das Wesen der Materie nach Kant's physischer Monadologie*, GSG I, 10–39.

11 *Metaphysicae cum geometria junctae usus in philosophia naturali, cuis specimen I. continent monadologiam physicam*, Kant, *Schriften* I, 473–487.

12 GSG I, 31, 32, 36.

13 GSG I, 27.

thesis, so that it will become a crucial theme of his thought. In the introduction to his 1890 *Ueber sociale Differenzierung* he wrote that "one of the chief goals of modern intellectual development" was "the resolution of universal concepts into the sum of their real individual appearances".[14]

The subject of Simmel's doctoral dissertation—Kant's *Naturphilosophie*—put him at the very center of philosophy in the 1870s and 1880s. These were the great creative decades of neo-Kantianism in Germany. Neo-Kantianism involved a complete reorientation of philosophy away from the grand speculative systems of idealism and toward the modest examination of the logic of the natural sciences. Kant was the inspiration for this reorientation not only because he insisted that experience is the limit of knowledge, but also because he made the logic of the natural sciences a central concern of his philosophy. It was for these reasons that two dominant figures in Berlin intellectual life—Alexander von Humboldt and Hermann Helmholtz—made Kant into their hero, their guide for the union of philosophy with science. It is also noteworthy that Friedrich Harms, one of Simmel's professors, had made Kant's views on "the essence of matter" into the central topic of his metaphysics.[15] (That phrase appears as the very title of Simmel's dissertation.) Thus, in making Kant's *Naturphilosophie* the subject of his dissertation, Simmel was putting himself at the very center of philosophy; he was participating in the ongoing transformation of the discipline.

1.3 Essay on Music

When Simmel submitted his essay on Kant for his doctoral dissertation, he was following the advice of his advisors. It was not his own judgment or preference. Earlier, he had other plans for his dissertation. He even submitted a study on the origins of music, *Psychologisch-enthographische Studien ueber die Anfänge der Musik*.[16]

That study did not please the examiners, Zeller and Helmholtz.[17] They thought that the theme was inappropriate for a dissertation. Helmholtz claimed that the author did not have a sufficient grounding in the physiology of the senses; and Zeller stated that too much of the argument was hypothetical and unproven. It did not help Simmel's case that, in choosing this theme,

14 GSG II, 126.

15 Friedrich Harms, *Abhandlungen zur systematischen Philosophie* (Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm Hertz, 1868), pp. 209–230.

16 Promotionsverfahren: Gesuch um Zulassung zum Rigorosum Vom 17, Dezember 1880, GSG XXIV, 179.

17 Promotionsverfahren: Dissertationsgutachten Eduard Zellers vom 19 Dezember 1880, GSG XXIV, 181–182; and Promotionsverfahren: Dissertationsgutachten 73 von Hermann Helmholtz, XXIV, 182–183.

he was not guided or supported by any ordinary professor of the philosophy faculty.

The inspiration for Simmel's dissertation on music came not from the philosophy faculty but from two of the leading thinkers of early ethnology: Moritz Lazarus (1824–1903) and Heyman Steinthal (1823–1899).[18] Lazarus and Steinthal were the fathers of a discipline they called *Völkerpsychologie*, whose chief subject was the *Volksgeist*, the spirit of a nation or people.

What constitutes the spirit of a nation or people, Lazarus and Steinthal explained, is its self-awareness, its awareness of having a common language and history.[19] Lazarus defines its underlying principle as "what in inner activity is common to all individuals of a nation, or *what is common to all individuals in their inner activity*".[20] The idea of a spirit of a nation seems to be blatant hypostasis; but Lazarus and Steinthal insisted that it exists only in and through its individual manifestations.[21] Simmel's critique of hypostasis is not only compatible with, but derives from the fathers of *Völkerpsychologie*.

According to Simmel himself, Lazarus and Steinthal were the most profound influences upon his intellectual development during his student years in Berlin. On August 6, 1880, Simmel sent Lazarus a copy of his prize-winning essay on Kant's theory of matter, and expressed his gratitude for all Lazarus had done for him: "…in every turning point in my intellectual career, I have the need to look back and I feel always gratitude toward you, who showed me the way, at least for the first step, in which I must go".[22] When Simmel first met Lazarus is unknown, and what exactly he owed to Lazarus has to be left to inference. Yet Simmel knew Lazarus personally, and on several occasions visited his home in Berlin.[23] Though Simmel's essay did not pass as a doctoral dissertation, the examiners' judgment was not shared by Lazarus and Steinthal; they evidently approved of Simmel's essay because they published a version of it in their *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*.[24]

18 On Lazarus and Steinthal and their importance for Simmel, see my *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 472–479.

19 See Lazarus, "Einleitende Gedanken über Völkerpsychologie", *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* I (1861), 1–73. See also "Ueber das Verhältniβ des Einzelnen zur Gesammtheit", a lecture first delivered in January 1861 and then published in 1883 in *Das Leben der Seele* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1883), I, 321–411.

20 "Einleitende Gedanken", p. 29. Lazarus' italics.

21 See Lazarus, "Einige synthetische Gedanken zur Völkerpsychologie", in *Zeitschrift fur Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* III (1865), 1–94, esp. 136.

22 GSG XXII, 9.

23 See Simmel to Lazarus, February 22, 1881, and August 19, 1881, GSG XXII, 12–14.

24 Simmel, "Psychologische und ethnologische Studien über Musik", *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, XIII (1882), 261–305.

Simmel's essay on music began by taking issue with a thesis of Charles Darwin: that the rhythms and cadences of speech derive from music, that the foundation for the development of language lies in musical sounds.[25] Simmel maintains the exact contrary: that music developed from language, not language from music. There was never wordless song among early men, Simmel maintains, because every act of singing expressed itself in words (50).[26] Simmel cannot give empirical proof for such an assumption and so falls back instead on a general a priori principle, which he learned from Steinthal.[27] This principle states that all human being is thinking, and that thinking is originally speaking (48). The human drive to express oneself, to balance inner emotion with external motion, finds its richer and most adequate form in language, Simmel writes (48). All thinking and feeling is a form of speaking, so that intense psychic activities express themselves in language. Song arises through the expression of feeling in language. It is indeed nothing more than speech intensified through passion (*eine durch Affekt gesteigerte Sprache*) (53).

Now and then in his essay Simmel expresses some of the central themes of *Völkerpsychologie*. Musical themes become popular, he says, because "because they represent the content of the *Volksseele*" (71). "However great are the innate powers that each individual brings to life", he writes, "it is the life of the fatherland, which encloses him from his first days, that allows him to become that which he is, that which impresses on him his character, and from which he gets his goals and direction…" (79). The role of the *Volksseele* is also apparent in the creativity of the composer.

> If music history almost always shows that every composer stands on the shoulder of his predecessors, it is implicit in this that the sum total of the previous musical development of a nation is the basis of its musical education, and each owes so much to the chain of his forbears that without them he would not be what he is.
>
> *(80)*

These lines express the holism of *Völkerpsychologie*, its rejection of the individualism of utilitarianism, which made the identity of each individual independent of the group. This holism will be decisive for the later development of Simmel's sociology.

25 Simmel cites the German translation of Victor Carus, *Die Abstammung des Menschen und die geschlechtliche Zuchtwahl* (Stuttgart: Schweizerbart, 1875), pp. 316–317.

26 Numbers in parentheses refer to Simmel's text in GSG I.

27 See Steinthal, *Der Ursprung der Sprache*, dritte Ausgabe (Berlin: Dümmler Verlagbuchhandlung, 1877), pp. 62–64. Here Steinthal cites Humboldt, whose theses he seems to accept. See also p. 372, where he discusses his later view of Humboldt.

Simmel's interest in music did not survive the rejection of his thesis by Zeller and Helmholtz. Despite his great productivity in aesthetics, despite the great range of his interests in the field and despite the great interest of the public in music, Simmel never wrote about music again. The silence is remarkable and deafening.

1.4 Sabotaging a Prize Essay

In 1881, shortly after obtaining his doctoral degree, Simmel decided to compete for another prize essay. This time the task was to write an exposition of Kant's theory of space and time, and to show how it refuted materialism.[28] The prize was set by a businessman, a certain "Herr J. Gillis" in St. Petersburg, who offered to pay 1000 gulden for the best essay. Gillis was very specific about the requirements for the essay: it should 1) show how materialism fell short; 2) provide clear proof of Kant's theory of the ideality of space and time; and 3) explain the implications of this theory for morality. He insisted that the essay should exclude "all philological research" of value only for scholars, and that it must avoid all use of foreign languages in citations and text. The exposition had to be popular, clearly comprehensible to an educated public. Clearly, Gillis had an ideological agenda which he expected the candidate to support. The theme was redolent of Friedrich Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus*, which had argued in 1873–1875 that Kant's idealism provides a refutation of materialism. Gillis wanted a popular version of Lange, which, he believed, would help to defeat materialism.

This time Simmel did not win the competition. The judges were very accomplished men: Ernst Laas (1837–1881), the positivist philosopher; Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), the psychologist and philosopher; and Max Heinze (1835–1909), the philologist and educator.[29] All of them praised Simmel's work, which they admired for its clarity and mastery of Kantian doctrine. But they agreed that it was not worthy of the prize simply because it had not fulfilled Gillis' desiderata. What Simmel submitted, Laas wrote, was "an exposition of the whole of transcendental philosophy"; he did not discuss the issue of idealism versus materialism; and he did not bother to give a popular exposition. For these reasons, the committee declined to give Simmel the prize. They insisted, though, that it was only for these reasons, and that otherwise the work deserved high praise.

Simmel was so little concerned with fulfilling Gillis' desiderata that it raises the question why he entered the competition in the first place. He must have known he was not going to win. His contribution seemed nothing short

28 The description of the task is in *Philosophische Monatshefte* 17 (1881), 320.
29 See Habil-Verfahren, GSG XXIV, 194–197.

of self-sabotage. In a review of the work that did win the prize,[30] Kurd Lasswitz's *Die Lehre Kants von der Idealität des Raumes und der Zeit*, Simmel gave his opinion of the desiderata of the competition. They confounded the demand for exact and esoteric science with the call for wide exoteric popularity; and they confused materialism in the philosophical sense with materialism as a cultural phenomenon. Simmel wanted to steer clear of these confusions. This still does not explain, however, why he entered the competition in the first place.

Some explanation for Simmel's lack of concern for the requirements of the competition comes from the fact that he later submitted his work for his habilitation, the examination which would give him the right to lecture at the university. An academic style was useless for a popular competition, but it was necessary for a habilitation.

Unfortunately, Simmel's habilitation dissertation has disappeared, just like his doctoral dissertation; it was probably another casualty of Nazi depredations or the devastation of the Hamburg docks. We know only a little about its contents from the judges of the habilitation, Eduard Zeller and Wilhelm Dilthey.[31] Zeller describes the dissertation as consisting in two parts: one treated synthetic judgments, the other "the concept of a pure representation" with the pure will as a practical principle.[32] The exposition strived for a middle position between an exegesis of Kant's texts and independent criticism. Zeller found much to praise in the dissertation: a deep familiarity with Kant's texts, a thorough understanding of his system and an ability to penetrate to the heart of a philosophical question. He recommended that the dissertation be accepted for the habilitation. Dilthey agreed.[33]

With the dissertation accepted, Simmel had only two more hurdles before he could complete the habilitation. One was an oral examination, a colloquium, before the faculty; and the other was a public lecture. Usually, these were formalities. Both took place February 14, 1884. The topic for Simmel's lecture was the metaphysical foundations of knowledge. Surprisingly, not everything went smoothly. The protocol on Simmel's lecture reported that it was "unsatisfactory", and that he should try again in six months.[34] No official explanation is given for this rejection. It appears to have been

30 "Eine neue Popularisirung Kants", GSG I, 181–184.

31 Habil-Verfahren: Protokoll der Fakultätskonferenz vom 1 November 1883, GSG XXIV, 197.

32 Habil-Verfahren: Gutachen Eduard Zeller über die Habilitationsschrift vom 19 November 1883, GSG XXIV, 188–189.

33 Habil-Verfahren: Stellungnahme Wilhelm Diltheys zu Zellers Gutachten vom 8 Dezember 1883. GSG XXIV, 199.

34 Habil-Verfahren: Protokoll des Dekans über die Probevorlesung vom 14 Februar 1884, GSG XXIV, 202.

punishment for Simmel's allegedly rude behavior toward a senior faculty member at the earlier colloquium. The senior faculty member, probably Zeller, made an irrelevant interjection about the seat of the soul, which annoyed Simmel, who admits he was "*derb*" to the interrupter.[35] While the faculty member was not bothered, the rest of the faculty found Simmel's behavior unacceptable. They wanted to teach a "young badger" (*junger* Dachs) how he should speak toward an "old man".[36] Nearly a year later, on January 8, 1885, Simmel came back to give his lecture and to repeat the colloquium, which was now accepted.[37] He finally habilitated on January 19, 1885.

Having completed his habilitation, Simmel earned the right to lecture at the university, but he would earn no salary. The only income would come from fees charged to students, though these fees were rarely charged or collected. Simmel's first teaching semester was the Summer Semester 1885, when he lectured on Kant's moral philosophy. After that first semester, Simmel lectured every semester—two semesters a year—from 1885 to 1918.[38] He would usually lecture two hours a week on two topics, each an hour long. The subjects were usually Kant, ethics, sociology and the history of philosophy. Simmel was an extremely popular lecturer, usually filling the auditorium.[39] His fame spread through the lecture hall more than his writings.

1.5 Review of Steinthal

Young academics write reviews. It is a safe and sure way to start their careers. Simmel was no exception to this rule. From 1883 to 1890, before the publication of his major works in the early 1890s, he wrote many reviews, some twelve in all.[40] Some of these reviews are very short, some of them amounting to little more than a notice of a book's publication; but a few are much longer and weightier than the others. One of these is Simmel's review of Heymann Steinthal's *Allgemeine Ethik*,[41] which appeared in 1885 in the *Vierteljahrschrift*

35 See Simmel's explanation of the incident in Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 107–108.

36 What exactly Simmel said is not known. A badger (*Dachs*) was an expression for a cheeky youngster. *Ein vorlauter oder fecher Dachs* is translated as "a little rascal, young whipper-snapper".

37 Habil-Verfahren: Protokoll des Dekans über die Probevorlesung vom 8 Januar 1885, GSG XXIV, 206.

38 A list of all the lectures is provided in GSG XXIV, 607–637. The student lecture notes are in Band 21 of the *Gesamtausgabe*.

39 On Simmel's lectures and lecturing style, see the accounts by Ferdinand Bruckner, Emil Ludwig, Richard Kroner and Kurt Gassen in *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel*, 2. Auflage, eds. Kurt Gassen and Michael Landmann (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1993), pp. 147–149, 152–156, 228–229, 299–301.

40 See GSG I, 179–243.

41 H. Steinthal, *Allgemeine Ethik* (Berlin: Reimer, 1885).

für Wissenschaftliche Philosophie,[42] a prominent and prestigious place for a young academic. Simmel knew Richard Avenarius, the editor of the *Vierteljahrschrift*, who had offered him the review of Steinthal's book, an offer graciously accepted.[43]

The Steinthal review was one of the most important Simmel ever wrote. It gives his views on a wide variety of important topics—freedom, the foundation of morality, moral feeling, moral conflict, socialism—and anticipates much of his later philosophy. Simmel's critique of systematic morality, of socialism and of moral sentimentalism reappears in his mature writings. Though Simmel was very critical of Steinthal, he had to tread carefully. It was easy to go too far: for Steinthal was a friend,[44] and he was the brother-in-law of Lazarus, whom Simmel revered. A few years later, Hermann Cohen failed to show any discretion in his critique of Lazarus; and he suffered for it: Lazarus and Steinthal banished him.[45]

Steinthal wrote in the introduction to his *Allgemeine Ethik* that it was the task of ethics to show how morality is possible in a deterministic mechanical world.[46] Accepting that statement of the task of ethics, Simmel asked about Steinthal's position on freedom and responsibility (193). Steinthal held that freedom is "not the indeterminate possibility of a bad action in place of a good one but the good action itself".[47] In other words, freedom is not the possibility of doing otherwise; it consists in moral action itself.

Simmel found Steinthal's views on freedom desperate and sad. He did not find Steinthal's general position defensible. Even if the *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae* is nonsensical, the freedom on which moral merit and responsibility depends still rests on the possibility of doing otherwise, i.e., on the fact that though we willed one thing we could have still willed another (194). The most decided determinist still justifies his admiration for an official who sacrifices his job and bread for the sake of his political convictions on the *possibility* that he could have been a renegade or coward. It appears to me completely arbitrary, Simmel concluded, to narrow the concept of freedom to morality in order to keep the concept of freedom; it would be much better to get rid of the word (i.e., freedom) with the concept.

42 *Vierteljahrschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie*, Jahrgang 10 (1886) 487–503.

43 Avenarius to Simmel, Briefentwurf vom 18 Januar 1886, GSG XXII, 25.

44 See Simmel to Lazarus, August 19, 1881, GSG XXII, 13–14.

45 Cohen reviewed Lazarus' *Ethik des Judentums* in the *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 43 (1899), 385–300, 433–449. Lazarus regarded the review as a personal attack; he died, however, before he could reply to it. On Lazarus' and Steinthal's reaction to Cohen's review, see Lazarus to Sigmund Maybaum, December 19, 1899, in *Moritz Lazarus und Heymann Steinthal: Die Begründer der Völkerpsychologie in ihren Briefen*, ed. Ingrid Belke (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1971), pp. 229–230.

46 Steinthal, *Allgemeine Ethik*, p. 18.

47 Steinthal, *Allgemeine Ethik*, p. 362.

Simmel questions not only Steinthal's theory of freedom but also his answer to the question about the motives for morality (196). Steinthal locates these motives in a special moral feeling. Simmel agrees with Steinthal that there must be some feeling for the morality of an action; there must be something about it that pleases us. But he still has one question for the advocate of moral feeling: "Why do we so often do evil when the good pleases us more?" (197). If a person is pleased more by an immoral action than a moral one, then *ex hypothesi* there will be no basis for the command of duty.

Steinthal's theory of moral feeling attempts to avoid the danger of a "sensualistic ethics", which decides morality simply on the basis of strength of feeling, by a distinction between "pathological" and "objective" feelings (198). These objective feelings are "a special kind of feelings", Steinthal says, and upon them "stands or falls ethics as well as aesthetics".[48] This theory seems very convenient because it gives ethics a kind of objectivity which rests upon experience but which does not require logical provability. Simmel is skeptical, however, if there really are "objective feelings". The question for him is whether a feeling, which is only subjective and a-logical, can make a claim to universality, which is required by all moral and aesthetic judgment (198–199). When Steinthal declares that there are such feelings, it is like inventing a special musical sense to explain the pleasure of music; it is plain it is only an *ad hoc* power to explain the phenomenon.

Steinthal thinks that moral feeling is aroused through correspondence with its object, which is the "idea". Supposedly, one cannot go beyond the ideas, which are the ultimate source of rationality.[49] They express the formal relations of the will, which make it moral. Steinthal says that there are five ideas: the ethical personality, generosity, unification, rectitude and perfection. They provide the criteria which are applied to moral feeling, the will and character.

Simmel cannot accept that these five ideas circumscribe the whole realm of morality (199). One cannot claim that they are a priori because one could only discover them a posteriori. Simmel cannot find any systematic unity among these ideas; they are not derived from one another or a single principle. They provide only an inventory of the ideals of the author; they provide at best material for a moral science but not any result (200).

Having examined Steinthal's general moral theory, Simmel turns to his ethical ideals, specifically his socialism. Here Steinthal held a very idealistic doctrine: that in a perfect moral world, private property would disappear. The reward for work should be inner worth, so that devotion for the community should move everyone; the better worker needs no external reward

48 Steinthal, *Allgemeine Ethik*, p. 44.
49 Steinthal, *Allgemeine Ethik*, p. 65.

or profit. As an example for such a possibility, Steinthal gives the scholarly world where the worker is not motivated by reward but by the ideal itself.

Simmel remarks on this doctrine: that the more laborious, lowly and routinized the work, the more difficult it is to focus on its value for the social whole (201). The more lowly the worker, the more difficult is his task and the less rewarding; it is much more difficult to dig a ditch than to solve a mathematical problem. Of course, the higher the activity, the more it has its reward in itself; but the more lowly and ordinary work, which most of us have to do, the more its inner reward and interest disappears.

Simmel also questions whether socialism is the best path for the production of culture (202). He thinks that culture comes into existence only through a minority which is willing to work for its own sake and which takes responsibility for failure. The socialist state destroys this motivation because it demands that everyone do useful labor for the state; the state supplies the means of subsistence, and so it requires that everyone do something in return. But if that is the case, what would the state do for "a Professor Galvani" who spends all his time experimenting with frogs legs? The genius does not know a priori whether his experiment will succeed; this holds for every cultural realm, Simmel insists.

Simmel departs sharply from Steinthal's views about the conflict of duties (205–207). Steinthal thought that the majority of cases of conflict were imaginary or avoidable, and that one should never allow one's higher principles to be achieved through violating others because the good should never sanctify evil actions. He assumed that a good will and correct insight are sufficient to dispel all disharmony and collision of duties.[50]

Simmel held such a position to be absurdly optimistic. From the smallest to the greatest concerns of life, he argued, we are constantly beset with demands, all of which have their moral dignity; but we can only partially fulfill some of them (206). This is due to limitations of power, time and space, and because we also have many other duties. The struggle for existence also applies to the realm of moral demands; only some of the many a priori possible demands have a chance of survival and will actually attract our attention and direct our conduct. There is no a priori limit to determine to what degree one should sacrifice one idea for another. A moral agent should not ask whether the end justifies the means—for there cannot be any doubt about that—but only by what criteria to measure the relative value of duties in concrete cases (207).

Simmel acknowledged that, in an ideal world, the principles of morality could form a harmonic system (207). But the problem came with their application to the real world, which is the product of thousands of accidently

50 Steinthal, *Allgemeine Ethik*, 128, 308.

colliding and endlessly variable circumstances. This is what made it impossible for moral duties to form a harmonic system. The systematic order of the world of moral ideals could not dissolve the collision of concrete duties, which came from the world of empirical reality.

Steinthal attempted to give additional support to the ideals of morality by attaching them to Lazarus' doctrine of "objective spirit". Lazarus held that the language, laws, customs and institutions of a culture have a status above and beyond the individuals who participate in them; these features of a culture are the product of a long history; they were there before the present generation; and they will persist for future generations. Hence people pay their respects to the objective spirit of a culture; they have been educated by it and they live according to it. Moral principles too are part of this objective spirit, Steinthal contended, so they should receive similar respect.

Simmel could see the attractions of objective spirit for Steinthal; but he did not think that the marriage of objective spirit with the ideals of morality really worked (209). The problem was that the objective spirit of a culture did not consist only in its moral ideals; its content was determined by what happened in history, so that it participated in all the weaknesses, errors and problems of history itself. The belief in witches, torture, anti-Semitism and fanaticism also formed the objective spirit of a nation. Steinthal's connection of moral ideals with objective spirit therefore seemed "all too optimistic" (210). If we owe the good to objective spirit, we also owe evil to it.

Simmel's review did not leave much standing of Steinthal's book. Fortunately, Steinthal never took offense. Several years later he recommended Simmel for a position in Kiel.[51]

1.6 Rembrandt Review

On June 1, 1890, in the *Sonntagsbeilage* of the *Vossische Zeitung*,[52] Simmel published another important early review. Unlike the Steinthal review, which was addressed to philosophers, this review, fitting its publication in a newspaper supplement, was directed to a general audience. The book under review was *Rembrandt als Erzieher*,[53] which appeared anonymously in January 1890. This book was a great commercial and critical success, going through 39 editions since its original publication.[54] There was much speculation

51 See GSG XXII, 205–206.

52 "Rembrandt als Erzieher", *Vossische Zeitung, Sonntagsbeilage* Nr. 22, 1.6.1890.

53 *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Leipzig: Hirschfeld, 1890).

54 On the early reception of the book, see Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 109–110, 153–166.

about the author; it is not clear whether Simmel ever knew his identity.[55] The author was a relative unknown, Julius Langbehn (1851–1907), an eccentric bohemian, vagabond and self-proclaimed prophet.

Langbehn's book was a call for the cultural renewal of Germany. It was a critique of every facet of modern culture: mass education; intellectualism; the dominance of the natural sciences; democracy; the rise of the working classes; social conformity; medicine and technology; urban life and city living. Like a true romantic, Langbehn was convinced that the remedy for all these evils was the healing and inspiring powers of art. Among all the artists he especially revered Rembrandt, who became his model for cultural renewal. Rembrandt illustrated the virtues of individuality and authenticity,which had become all too rare in modern culture.

In his advocacy of art and individuality, Langbehn resembled no one more than the young Nietzsche. Recognizing his affinity with the philosopher, Langbehn vowed to visit him. Unfortunately, in 1890, Nietzsche was in a sanatorium in Jena. That did not deter Langbehn, who was convinced he could cure the hapless patient. So Langbehn journeyed to Jena; he talked and walked with Nietzsche for weeks; and even offered to take care of him. Fortunately for the patient, Elisabeth Nietzsche declined his offer.

In his review Simmel observes two opposed tendencies in modern culture: the power of triviality and the power of paradox. One sees in equal measure the desire to conform, to be part of the crowd, and the desire to be a rebel, not to be part of the crowd. The former ends in triviality; the latter ends in paradox. Nowhere in recent literature, with the exception of Nietzsche, are these tendencies so intermingled, Simmel says, as in the book *Rembrandt als Erzieher*. "Never have I seen mixed such banal and insignificant basic ideas with such sparkling spirit and original language…", Simmel wrote (232). Those lines, which were often cited, were the most positive in the entire review.

It is one of the most dangerous and seductive undertakings, Simmel wrote, to prophesize the general tendencies of a coming age. Although one can always find indications in the present, there are also too many counterindications to forecast the future reliably. A general prediction is just as easily confirmed as it is refuted. To prove his point, Simmel offers an opposing sketch to the author's vision of the future (233).

Simmel agrees with Langbehn that the natural scientific worldview, which has dissolved everything into a mechanical play of atoms, has undermined the old aesthetic vision of the world, which was anthropomorphic

55 Simmel's one reference to the review does not refer to the author. See Simmel to Max Abraham, May 31, 1890, GSG XXII, 40.

and anthropocentric. Although traces of that vision still remain in the subconscious, it has been gradually replaced by a more objective mathematical account of the world. Modern man can no longer find his reflection or satisfaction in nature, which now has the appearance of an alien indifferent being. Because he cannot find satisfaction from nature, man turns toward the human world, and specifically to the social organism (236). It is now in the human world that he must find meaning for his life.

If we are to find redemption through the human world, Simmel argues, then we must understand that world according to the modern historical-sociological viewpoint (236). According to this viewpoint, a human being is a product of "the historical development of his genus", and his nature consists in nothing more than "an interaction of social threads" (236). This robs him of his "false unity and independence", and it dissolves him into "a sum of properties and powers, which have been made by the succession of his fate and by the coexistence of his society". Nevertheless, this viewpoint allows the individual to find meaning in existence, Simmel maintains, because through it he finds his "meaningful place in society" (237). Although the individual is no longer a well-rounded whole, the collectivity becomes that whole through the collaboration of all its members (238).

It was with this view of redemption that Simmel countered Langbehn's extreme individualism and heroism. Simmel agreed with Langbehn that everything great and beautiful had to be individual; but he disagreed with the converse: that everything individual is great and beautiful (140). This kind of facile and fallacious reasoning, which believed the conversion of a proposition to be as valid as the proposition itself, "falsifies the value of life itself", Simmel said. It made it seem that because the good is rare and special, then everything distinctive, and apart from the norm, has to be good.

Simmel thought that Langbehn's reasoning showed that something was missing in his education: "a competent logical training" (240). Langbehn thought that if the Germans made individualism their ideal, then they would make Rembrandt their educational model. Rembrandt was the consummate individual, in his life and art, Langbehn believed. But it was still all too questionable, Simmel replied, to make one artist's vision into a model for all aspects of life; the claim that all life's norms could be derived from Rembrandt's art was "the most unbearable aestheticism" (240). Langbehn reasoned: because Rembrandt was free from all imitation, he could free the Germans from all imitation. But, on such a skimpy basis, Simmel argued, one could just as well make many Germans—Luther, Dürer, Lessing and Beethoven—into models for the people. "In this manner one could prove everything and therefore nothing" (241).

That a book like Langbehn's had achieved such success, despite its sloppy reasoning, reveals a weak point in our intellectual development, Simmel

concludes (242). People are so pressed for time, but they are offered so much to read, that they are attracted by a book's style alone; they do not take the time to examine its content carefully. The success of Langbehn's book is a sign of the times, which combines "the sparkling brilliance of form with the vagueness and insignificance of content" (243).

Though Simmel regarded Langbehn's book a failure, it did not have one positive effect: it sparked his interest in Rembrandt. Twenty-six years after his review, Simmel himself would write about Rembrandt in what became his best-selling work.[56]

56 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt. Ein kunstphilosophischer Versuch*. (Leipzig:m Kurt Wolff, 1916). GSG XV, 305–515. On this work, see Gerald Hartung, "Rembrandt-Ein kunstphilosophischer Versuch", in *Simmel Handbuch*, eds. Jörn Bohr, Gerald Hartung, Heike Koenig, Tim Florian Steinbach (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2021), pp. 365–379.

2

BEGINNINGS IN SOCIOLOGY

2.1 The First Book and Its Theme

Apart from his dissertation, Simmel's first book was his *Über sociale Differenzierung*, which was first published in 1890.[1] The title demands explanation. Simmel never provided a technical definition of its key term, differentiation. Broadly speaking, differentiation was the process by which a society grew, by which it divided into a multiplicity of norms, groups and vocations. Behind the concept, there was an organic metaphor: just as a living organism grows through the increasing differentiation of its functions, so society grows through the increasing number and complexity of its parts. This organic way of thinking, which replaced the mechanistic way of thinking of the 18th century, was widespread in the 19th century. Simmel's predecessors in sociology—Spencer, Lazarus and Steinthal—were all in the organic tradition.

Though he is in the organic tradition, Simmel does not endorse it wholeheartedly. He is cautious in the use of organic metaphors. He warns that one must not assume, as many organicists have, that there is a *Lebenskraft*, or vital force, directing all the parts of an organism (142). The organism grows only through the powers *within* its parts, only through their reciprocal interaction. There is not a third or higher force above the parts coordinating and controlling them. It is only because one cannot observe the interactions

1 G. Simmel, *Über sociale Differenzierung. Sociologische und psychologische Untersuchungen.* Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1890. First published as Band 10, Heft 1, in the series *Staats und Socialwissenschaftliche Forschungen,* ed. Gustav Schmoller. The book was reprinted in 1905 and 1910. All references in parentheses above are to the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe,* II, 115–295.

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between the parts, which are very fine and intricate, that one postulates a higher power above them directing their operations. With this caution, Simmel felt that he had removed the greatest danger behind organic metaphors: hypostasization.

As his title implies, Simmel was especially concerned with differentiation as a *social* phenomenon. But he by no means intended to limit its meaning in this way. He also saw differentiation as a *psychological* phenomenon, and it was as such that he gave it great importance. There were "two great principles of all external and internal development", he wrote: one was the striving to be *like* others; the other was the striving to be *different* from them (II, 200). The striving to be different had the edge over its counterpart. What determined and promoted our activity "for the greater part", Simmel wrote, was the attempt to be different from others. We observe differences between people when we determine our place among them, and how we want to use them. Thus, differentiation is for Simmel both an individual and a social phenomenon; it is the process by which people and societies grow.

It is important to see, however, that differentiation was not only the striving to be different, to be a unique individual or a distinct personality. It was something much more problematic and sinister: the striving *to have* more than someone else, the struggle to have power over them. Self-differentiation thus involved competition against one's peers; it was nothing less than what Rousseau called *amour propre*. This is what the ancient moralists called "*pleonexia*", to which Simmel refers in just this connection.[2] As we shall soon see, Simmel believed that the socialists had overlooked or underrated this important motivation of social and political behavior.

2.2 Basic Questions about Sociology

Since Simmel conceived *Über sociale Differenzierung* as a work of sociology, and since sociology was still a controversial discipline in the late 19th century, he began his work with a discussion of the scientific status of sociology.[3] The Introduction, or chapter 1, treats two basic questions about this status: Are there laws in sociology like there are laws in the natural sciences? And in what sense is discourse about society reducible to talk about the individuals who compose it?

The formation of sociology, Simmel explains, has differed greatly from the formation of sciences in the past (116). When one formed a science in the past, one began with enquiries into individual subjects; one wanted the

2 See *Über sociale Differenzierung*, IV. "Das sociale Niveau", GSG II, 232–234.
3 I: "Einleitung. Zur Erkenntnistheorie der Socialwissenschaft", GSG II, 115–125.

science to have a content; so one collected material before raising questions about methods and goals. Without sufficient material, there was a danger of making "a lawbook without a subject", "a rule without cases". But nowadays the formation of science is different: one focuses on goals and methods before one considers the content or factual basis. This is because the factual basis is a given; the crucial question is how to interpret or understand it (116).

This difference in the formation of a modern science, Simmel thinks, corresponds to the present situation of sociology. Sociology is an eclectic science: it builds on the products of other sciences. It works on the basis of history, anthropology, statistics and psychology; it does not deal directly, therefore, with the facts that these sciences uncover. It is rather a science "of a second power", because it makes syntheses out of what are already syntheses. What sociology gives is not new facts, then, but a new standpoint, a perspective for the consideration of already known facts. The problem is then to fix this standpoint, to give some rough definition of it, because the very identity of the science depends upon it (117).

All this does not mean, Simmel is eager to point out, that one must begin with clear definitions and distinct concepts before one answers any questions in the science. One must begin with rough and approximate accounts of the subject matter before one reaches exact definitions and concepts. Simmel reminds us here of the old Aristotelian dictum: what is first in subject matter is later in knowledge (117, 137). In other words, the most fundamental concepts of a subject matter determine its very identity, but they are the final product of intensive enquiry, so that we know them only later. Or, as Simmel also puts it, "the simplest results of thinking are not the result of the simplest thinking" (118).

Sociology faces a formidable obstacle, Simmel thinks, because it has the most complex subject matter of all the sciences (118). The task of sociology is to describe the interrelations of human beings in groups, and then the interrelations of groups to one another. This is a challenging undertaking, however, because the human being, the basic unit of its subject matter, is the most complex organism in all of nature. The complexity of the subject matter is then greatly magnified when the human being interacts with others in a group. There is then the complexity of the interactions in addition to the complexity of the units of the interactions.

Because of the complexity of its subject matter, Simmel thinks that it is impossible for sociology to establish laws in the same sense as the natural sciences (122–123). Any social event is the product of very complicated conditions or circumstances, so that one can determine its cause only by an artificial abstraction, i.e., only by emphasizing one factor at the expense of others. In reality, all the factors are inseparable from one another, so that it is impossible to say that one alone is the cause (123). We cannot determine

which event is *the* cause of a given effect or which event is *the* effect of a given cause (122–123).

Although he does not carefully distinguish them, Simmel has two distinct arguments against the possibility of sociological laws. First, that the parts of a social whole form such a unity that each part is the effect of all the others. This means that it is impossible to isolate variables, to select one part as the sole sufficient cause of any other. Second, that the social whole is dynamic, so that its entire state at any moment never or rarely recurs. This means that we cannot make generalizations about what *always* happens.

Although these arguments are distinct, Simmel says that there is a single fundamental principle behind them. He articulates it thus: "We must accept as a regulative universal world principle that everything stands in some interaction with everything else, that between every point in the world and every other there are powers and back and forth relations between them…" (130). This principle means that everything is connected with everything else, so that there are lawful connections between them. However, this principle is regulative because, though we cannot provide a proof for it, we must proceed as if it were true. We can determine connections between any two factors only by artificially abstracting them from the whole web of relations in which they take place.

No sooner does Simmel conclude his case against the possibility of social laws than he suggests a strategy for defending them (130).[4] From his regulative world principle, he draws a remarkable conclusion: that it is possible to formulate such laws after all, provided that they are understood in the proper sense. Although everything is intimately interconnected with everything else, it is still permissible to select certain factors as important for our interests and to regard them as causes. If the interaction between two factors is conspicuous and frequent enough, we are justified in abstracting them from the whole and generalizing from them. While this is not a law in the strict sense (*Gesetzmässigkeit*), which demands universality and necessity, it still amounts to regularity (*Regelmässigkeit*), which requires only constant conjunction (130). What justifies this abstraction, Simmel suggests, is simply what is convenient (*zweckmässig*). We find that through it we can better achieve the ends of enquiry. Social laws are possible, then, provided that we understand them not as accurate pictures or copies of reality itself but only as useful assumptions for achieving our ends. Here Simmel is foreshadowing his later pragmatism.[5]

4 This defense is ignored in secondary literature. It is as if Simmel denied the possibility of laws *tout court*. See, for example, David Frisby, *Georg Simmel* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 58, 76; and Ralph Leck, *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 67.

5 See below Section 2.6.

After examining the possibility of general laws in sociology, Simmel considers the issue of the status of social wholes, i.e., whether and how the concept of society is reducible to, or more than, its parts. He first puts forward the case for holism. If sociology is to be a science, Simmel explains, then the concept of society must mean more than the mere sum total of its parts or the individuals who compose it (126). If society is only a collection of individuals, then there is no special object for sociology, which can be replaced by the study of individuals and the relations between them.

Yet Simmel is sympathetic to nominalism, i.e., the doctrine that everything that exists is individual, and that the universal is only a name. One of the chief goals of modern education, he maintains, is to treat universals as subjective creations, and to resolve their apparent reality into a collection of their individual cases (126). We must eliminate, as he puts it, "a ghostly Platonism that darkens our worldview". Since only individuals exist, they are the only proper object of science; the universal, which is no more than a collection of individuals, is only a creation of thought, and so not a real existing subject at all.

Though Simmel seems to accept this nominalism, he warns us of an insuperable difficulty attending it. The problem is that the individual human being is no more an absolute unity, an ultimate reality, than the universal (127). It was all too natural to regard the individual as an eternal irreducible unity in the old theocentric worldview, because it regarded the individual as an indivisible soul. But this is no longer possible, he argues, according to the modern evolutionary perspective which treats the individual as the product of a long history. The individual is the result of a process consisting of innumerable stages. We treat the individual as simple and irreducible only because we abstract from the process that formed it. The individual is not a self-sufficient entity, then, but an abstraction.

If the individual is not an ultimate unity, then there is no point where we can say that an analysis must stop. We must regard the units of any analysis as relative, as the last point we have reached so far in our investigation, though that investigation could always in principle proceed further. The question of the ultimate units of a science is therefore "a question of practice" (129). We stop our analysis at that point that is convenient for our purposes. Here again Simmel suggested pragmatism as a solution to the difficulty.

Though there is no such thing as society as such or the ultimate individual, it does not follow that these concepts are entirely fictitious. Simmel thinks that there is still a basis for these concepts in reality: the interaction of their parts. We regard an object as unified to the degree that its parts stand in reciprocal dynamic relations (129). The reality of the object is not a matter of kind but a matter of degree, depending on the intensity and extent of the interaction of its parts (130). If we explain the reality of the object according

to the interaction of its parts, then the concept of society loses the mystical penumbra that surrounds it.

Although the social whole exists only in its individuals and their interactions, there is still an extent to which it is non-reducible to them. The interaction of the parts can create an objective structure which has an independence from the individuals taking part within it (133). The universal can be indeed the cause of common phenomena appearing in the individuals. We take it as a heuristic maxim that a common cause is to be expected when individuals act in ways that show similar appearances. Although the whole exists in and through the individuals, it also is what binds them together and makes them what they are. This is the phenomenon that Lazarus and Steinthal referred to as *Verdichtung*, i.e., when parts of a whole solidify into characteristics that are independent of them as individuals.

In the end, then, Simmel believes in social wholes just as he believes in social laws. The concepts of a social whole and a social law are legitimate, not because they designate a particular kind of entity or aspect of reality, but because they are necessary to achieve the purposes of enquiry. Simmel's justification of sociology was therefore pragmatic: it was a necessity for the understanding of society, even if it did not correspond to a special realm or kind of truth.

2.3 Collective Responsibility

Throughout *Über sociale Differenzierung*, Simmel analyzes differentiation in its various forms. One of its most conspicuous forms was the idea of collective responsibility, which he discusses in chapter 2.[6] Simmel begins with the observation that in primitive epochs the social group was held responsible for the misdeeds of the individual. If an individual committed a crime, not only he but also his whole family or tribe was also guilty (II, 139). The family or tribe had to do penance, or pay the penalty, to the family or tribe whose member was a victim. In these epochs the individual had bonded so tightly with the group because his survival depended on it; everything he said or did was for the sake of the group, which nurtured and protected him. Hence his actions seemed to be those of the group itself, which was responsible for him. The notion of collective responsibility thus followed from the close relationship between the individual and the group; it seemed that what the individual thought and did is what the group thought and did through him.

In a small social group, just as the individual depends on the group, the group depends on the individual. Without the contributions of each of its members, the group will wither and die. This puts a burden on each

6 II: "Über Kollektivverantwortlichkeit", GSG II, 139–168.

individual, who must do his part. In a larger social group, however, the same task can be performed by many individuals. Hence the burden on each individual is less, so that one is free to do other things. Furthermore, the larger the social group, the more relationships one can form with others; hence, one is not confined to enter into one kind of relationship; one can choose between different kinds. Hence Simmel sees greater individual freedom as a growth of differentiation (II, 173–174).

Social differentiation was increased through economic competition (II, 169). The necessity of competing for the means of subsistence made it necessary for the individual to develop new means of acquiring it. Competition increased the speciality of individuals. Each had to cultivate a unique talent so that he or she would not be dispensable.

While differentiation increased *within* the group, so that its members became more individual and unlike one another, the groups themselves became more like one another. That is because, in facing similar economic pressures, they developed similar forms of differentiation (169, 175). The more the bonds of the original group loosened, the more freedom was given to the individual, but at the same time connections with the wider world and other groups increased (172). For example, when the medieval guilds began to weaken, their members formed trade connections with people in other communities and foreign countries.

Though the idea of collective guilt is especially apparent in primitive epochs, Simmel does not think that it is confined to them. He points out that there has been a return to the idea in modern times, and indeed on the level of the highest culture (II, 158). Modern sociological doctrine holds that the individual is the product of society, that he has no fixed nature apart from and prior to the social forces that form him. When combined with the "transcendental knowledge" of natural causality, which holds that all events and actions are subject to causal explanation, this doctrine eliminates all personal freedom and responsibility. Whatever the individual does is then the result of social forces acting through him; hence he is not responsible, but the society that formed him is.

Refusing to enter into a sterile discussion about freedom of the will, Simmel declines to investigate this modern version of collective responsibility. He confines himself to one general point: that the moral quality of actions depends upon the quantitative element of social relations, i.e., upon how many people fall under them (II, 159, 160). "It is a question worthy of investigation", Simmel explains, "to what extent the mere numerical increase of a social circle changes the moral quality of actions regarding it. It is undeniably the case that praise and blame for a small circle are transformed into the direct opposite through its growth and extension…" (160). Simmel provides this example. The early church controlled all earthly interests of its community because it believed it could survive only if everyone surrendered their

possessions for the common good. Personal poverty was therefore taught as a moral and religious duty. But as society grew beyond the confines of the early church, this doctrine felt arbitrary and oppressive; the church eventually lost its authority to control earthly interests, and the right to acquire property grew for an increased population.

Already in *Über sociale Differenzierung* we find early hints of a doctrine that Simmel will later defend in his *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft:* relativism. Simmel holds that the moral beliefs of a culture depend on its social structure, and that social structures change in history. Thus Simmel makes a Nietzschean observation: that robbery and murder, lies and violence, were often prized in earlier stages of humanity (162). They were directed against a foreign tribe and regarded as heroic deeds; and within their own tribe, they were seen as means for the increase of culture. These actions were regarded as criminal behavior by later generations. From their perspective, vice is nothing less than atavism.

2.4 Social Niveau

Having considered the relationships between size and differentiation in chapters 2 and 3, Simmel moves on in chapter 4 to treat vertical relationships within a group, or what he calls social niveau or level.[7] Simmel distinguishes two different meanings of social level: the *common* possession of a quantity of people which is equally present in them all; and *collective* possession that is not found in any particular individual (226). He maintains that the characteristic development of social levels is that the common level decreases to the advantage of the collective (226–227). By this, he seems to mean that the older bonds of community give way to more legal authority, which is more abstract and impersonal.

Simmel holds that social level is the result of differentiation. When an individual cultivates his or her characteristic talents, he or she stands above the mass who are still in the group; he or she has less in common with them. The lesser degree of education of a group means that its members are more alike and that there is less differentiation among them (II, 207). Simmel seems convinced that the education of more members of society will still leave a gap between the lesser and higher educated: "…the cultural difference between the educated and uneducated is greatest in such times when the uneducated already have a high degree of education…" (208) He notes that the degree of culture and comfort of the present proletariat is much higher than previous generations; yet the gap between them and the higher classes has only increased. If there is a leveling movement active in a culture, then it will

7 IV: "Das sociale Niveau", II, 199–236.

achieve its goals only through lowering the level of the higher classes rather than raising the level of the lower classes (210). What is common to all can belong only to the least in possessions. If a new leveling regime is to come into power, it will have to appeal to the feelings of the greater part of the population; speaking to the more intellectual opinions of a select minority will not help its cause (210–211).

In the context of discussing social level, Simmel introduces what he calls "one of the most adventurous sociological ideas" (217). This is the idea that the actions of a society have greater accuracy and effectiveness than those of the individual. In his deliberations, Simmel explains, the individual is often pushed and pulled between conflicting feelings, drives and thoughts, so that he vacillates and does not always make the right decision. But the social group knows who its friends and enemies are, at least as far as its actions are concerned. The distance between will and action, striving and achievement, means and ends, is much less for the group than the individual. Simmel rejects the explanation that the greater correctness of social decisions and actions is the result of a natural law, as if the group just naturally follows its own self-interest (218). The problem with this explanation is that it presupposes the old teleological view of nature, according to which nature always follows the simplest and most efficient path. Since nature has no purposes, he says, it cannot be that it follows the straightest path of fulfilling them. Nevertheless, Simmel still thinks that there is a better explanation for why social decision-making is more efficient and accurate than the individual: the goals of the group are more simple and primitive than those of the individual (219). The group does not know the dualism between selfish and selfless drives, which so confuses the individual; and although there are frictions *within* the group, they did not affect the group as a whole (219–220).

It was indeed an adventurous idea—so adventurous it is hard to understand why Simmel approved it. He seemed to ignore the problems of social conflict and how a whole society can adopt questionable values. Yet Simmel's defense of group decision was more half-hearted and qualified than it at first appears. He went on to explain how the individual's feeling of certainty, in a theoretical and ethical sense, coincided with "his more or less clear consciousness of its correspondence with the social whole" (223). What appeared universally valid and indubitable to him seemed confirmed through its "conformity with the collectivity". This was, he noted, "one of the main attractions of the catholic church". Yet Simmel does not give an absolute or unconditional validity to these feelings of certainty. The problem with them is that they dispense with individual responsibility and initiative; they give the individual "a careless certainty that hinders the sharpening and formation of his abilities" (224). These were the traditional Protestant criticisms of the Catholic faith. Simmel seemed just enough of a Protestant to endorse them.

Simmel closes his chapter with a very provocative claim: that it is doubtful to him that leveling, or the demand for equality, is absolutely opposed to that of differentiation (232). In all of nature, what we find is the striving of living beings to better themselves, to improve their situation so that they stand on a higher level than before; in the human world, this manifests itself in the desire to have and enjoy more than what one already has. No one is satisfied with the position of his fellow creatures but he wants to raise himself above them. But it is just this striving that appears in the demand for equality, Simmel claims, because even leveling has its source in the striving of one person to surpass others (233). So the demand for equality is not opposed to differentiation, but it has its source and motivation in differentiation. Socialism is for Simmel therefore simply "the pleonaxy of the masses" (234).

Simmel rejects any attempt to justify the demand for social and economic equality on the basis of logic; it does not follow from the equality of human beings that they should have equal rights or goods, he argues, because no factual equality entails a normative equality (234). This passage shows that Simmel is sympathetic to socialism, but that he cannot accept its dogmatic normative claims; he accepts socialism only on the realistic grounds that it stems from the striving for differentiation.

2.5 Intersecting Circles and Conservation of Force

In chapter 5 of *Über sociale Differenzierung*, Simmel discusses a characteristic phenomenon of the modern social world: what he calls "the intersection of social circles".[8] With increasing social differentiation, each individual formed new associations outside the family group, school and church. These new associations were not imposed upon him by fate, like being born in a certain family and in a certain place, but they were chosen by him according to his own individual interests and needs. The groups to which the individual belonged could be diverse, reflecting all sides of his life and personality, e.g., his vocation, political affiliation, religious beliefs, leisure interests, and so on. These groups could be *concentric*, where the interests of one enclosed that of another, viz., as belonging to a nation also meant having a vocation, or they could be *juxtaposed*, where no interests were overlapping but all were distinct, e.g., working as a plumber and being a member of a bowling club (241). It was also the case that the social rank within one group did not determine that of another, e.g., in the army a person of high social rank still could be a private (242). The number of the different circles to which an individual belonged was the measure of his or her culture (239). The modern individual was indeed defined by the groups to which he or she belonged (240). He or

8 V: "Über die Kreuzung socialer Kreise", GSG II, 237–256.

she was the "intersection point of innumerable social threads", and one became an individual through the quantity of the specific groups to which one belonged (241). Through membership in various social circles, the modern individual could approach two ideals: the ideal of socialization, of belonging to and finding company in a group; and individuality, of developing one's own identity through the unique combination of groups (244).

The final chapter of *Über sociale Differenzierung* discusses differentiation and the principle of the conservation of energy (*Kraftersparnis*).[9] By 1890, this principle had become extremely topical and popular in philosophy. Its classical statement comes from the field of physics: energy is neither created nor destroyed, or the total energy of a system remains constant over time, i.e., it is conserved. It was Ernst Mach who, in 1871, first introduced this principle into philosophy in his *Die Geschichte und die Wurzel des Satzes von der Erhaltung der Arbeit*.[10] Mach understood this principle not only in the classical physical sense but also as an epistemological ideal, which states that the best explanation is that which grasps the greatest magnitude of facts with the simplest and fewest means of explanation.[11] Mach sometimes called this his "principle of economy"; he explained that he got the idea from his colleague in economics at the University of Graz, Emmanuel Hermann, who applied the principle in all walks of life.[12] This economic principle meant that we should choose the most efficient and least costly means to achieve our ends. The discussion of this principle became further complicated in 1876 when Richard Avenarius published his *Philosophie als Denken der Welt gemäss dem Principle des kleinsten Kraftmasses*.[13] Avenarius called this his "principle of persistence" (*Princip der Beharrung*), which he explained in terms of Herbart's psychology: "The change which the soul imparts to its representations with the addition of new impressions is the smallest possible".[14]

When Simmel inherited this principle in the late 1870s, it had acquired all these meanings: physical, epistemological, economic and psychological.

9 VI: "Die Differenzierung und das Prinzip des Kraftersparnis", GSG II, 258–295.

10 Ernst Mach, *Die Geschichte und die Wurzel des Satzes von Erhaltung der Arbeit* (Prague: J.G. Calveischen Univ. Buchhandlung, 1872).

11 Ernst Mach, *Die Geschichte und die Wurzel des Satzes von Erhaltung der Arbeit* (Prague: J.G. Calveischen Univ. Buchhandlung, 1872), p. 31. Cf. Ernst Mach, *Die Mechanik in ihrer Entwickelung historisch-kritisch dargestellt* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1883), p. vi.

12 Ernst Mach, *Die Leitgedanke meiner naturwissenschaftlichen Erkenntnislehre und ihre Aufnahme durch die Zeitgenossen* (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1919), p. 3.

13 Richard Avenarius, *Philosophie als Denken der Welt gemäss dem Princip des kleinsten Kraftmasses. Prolegomena zu einer Kritik der reinen Erfahrung* (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1876).

14 Richard Avenarius, *Philosophie als Denken der Welt gemäss dem Princip des kleinsten Kraftmasses. Prolegomena zu einer Kritik der reinen Erfahrung* (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1876), p. iii.

Taking Mach and Avenarius as examples, Simmel had become convinced that, if this principle had proved so useful in other fields, it could be applied to sociology as well. Simmel's use of the term is just as rich and ambiguous as its forbears. To complicate an already complicated picture, Simmel had his own understanding of the principle: "the maxim that nature *sought*, though not necessarily *took*, the shortest way to achieve its ends" (II, 271). Simmel seemed to think that the application of the principle to sociology was obvious. He thinks that the principle of conservation is the basis for the principle of differentiation: that to save energy, society develops through differentiation (271, 281). Two of the greatest obstacles to conservation of energy in society are friction, or conflict, and superfluity, expending too many means to achieve an end. Both obstacles are avoided through differentiation: it mediates conflicting parties by allotting them different spheres or areas of activity; and it achieves efficiency by creating a division of labor which assigns to each worker a separate task in the achievement of an end.

2.6 Pragmatism

We have seen in an earlier section how Simmel defended the possibility of social laws by appealing to a criterion of "convenience". Even if one could not demonstrate the truth of a social law, Simmel argued, one was justified in accepting it because it promoted the purposes of enquiry. Though Simmel did not have the word for it, he was appealing to what later became known as the "pragmatic" criterion of truth.[15]

Yet despite the great importance of this criterion in his argument, Simmel still did not have a general theory to explain or justify it. He finally addressed that need in an important 1895 essay, "Ueber eine Beziehung der Selectionslehre zur Erkennistheorie".[16] Here Simmel stated *avant la lettre* the main

15 William James gave currency to the name "pragmatism" in his 1907 book of that name, *Pragmatism. A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1907). Arguably, James was moving toward his pragmatism before Simmel. See his "The Function of Cognition", which was read before the Aristotelian Society in December 1884. However, James himself admitted that this article, because it retained a realist view of truth, was still not his mature theory. According to James himself (*Pragmatism,* p. 47), he first announced his mature theory in a lecture he gave in 1898 in the University of California, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results". See his *Collected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1920) pp. 406–437. In this case, though he did not use the name, Simmel developed his own pragmatic theory three years before James.

16 This article was first published in the *Archiv für systematische Philosophie* I (1895), 34–45. GSG V, 62–74.

conceptions behind his pragmatic theory of truth. For this reason, Simmel has sometimes been described as a founder of pragmatism.[17]

Simmel begins by outlining the standard view of the relationship between theory and practice (62–63). According to this view, there is an objective truth whose content is independent of our practical interests. A proposition is true or false apart from whether it serves our interests or needs. This view of the truth is common to both realism and idealism, Simmel says. Realism assumes that the truth consists in some object independent of cognition, which our cognition passively receives and resembles or mirrors. Idealism assumes that the truth consists in coherence with basic a priori elements of our knowledge, where these elements are like first principles and our knowledge like conclusions from them. Common to both realism and idealism are the assumptions that truth is independent of practice and the condition for its success. So truth is not the result of successful practice but the precondition for it.

Having expounded these opposing views, Simmel then asks whether there is a common root behind our needs and what we regard as objective reality or truth, which are separate according to the standard view. He admits that we can determine whether any *single* representation is true or false by seeing whether it meets basic theoretical criteria, such as coherence or empirical verification (63). But the crucial question remains, he insists, of the truth of the *whole* of our representations, i.e., the entire *system* of which they are a part. Since we normally measure truth or falsity *within* the whole or system, we cannot measure the truth or falsity of the whole itself, at least not by theoretical means (63–64, 68). To determine the truth or falsity of the whole, he proposes, we need to ask whether acting on it proves useful. We should call those representations true "that have proven themselves to be a motive for purposive, life-promoting action" (64). Once we make this move, Simmel argues, we remove the dualism the standard view postulates between our needs and objective reality. The truth of the whole of our representation no longer depends on their correspondence with some independent reality but with "that quality of representations that make them the cause of desired actions" (64). The concept of truth now means "the rule governed, practically effective consequence of thinking" (64). The common view of the relationship between truth and utility has now been reversed: our basic representations are useful not because they are true but they are true because they are useful.

To explain why acting on some of our representations is successful, Simmel argues that we do not have to accept the old realist assumption that they somehow resemble or correspond with an external reality. The common

17 Simmel's affinity with pragmatism was first brought out by Wilhelm Jerusalem, "Zur Weiterentwicklung des Pragmatismus", *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 34 (1913), Spalte 3205–3226.

sense view assumes that the representations that are the causes of our actions have some kind of morphological similarity with their effects (64). But there is no evidence for such an assumption. The immediate effects of my acting are nerve and muscle movements, which have no resemblance to the content of the representations that cause them. There is no more resemblance between my representations and their effects or object in the external world than there is between the symbols of the telegram machine and the words that translate it (66). The success of our representations does not depend on their content but on the energy or force that they give to our actions. In general, we must distinguish the content of a representation from its dynamic sense, which consists in the results of acting upon it (67).

Despite his Kantian leanings, Simmel's article is as much a critique of idealism as realism. The idealist finds truth in the coherence of representations among themselves, and more specifically with their conformity with certain general principles. While this criterion is fine for a single representation, it begs the question of the truth of the system of representations itself. For why adopt this system rather than another? (67). Kant's dualism between the realms of theoretical and practical reason has reintroduced a mystery as great as Descartes' dualism between mind and body, Simmel claims (70). How do such realms correspond with one another if they are so heterogeneous? We have no reason a priori for assuming that the standards of practical reason apply to the realm of appearances, which is the domain of theoretical reason. We can remove this mystery, Simmel argues, only if we realize that our theoretical standards are ultimately dictated by our practical needs. The understanding is then no longer an autonomous function to which our practical ends somehow mysteriously correspond; instead, the activities of the understanding are just functions of the needs of an organism.

Granted that the truth of our representations depends on their utility, the question remains what is the measure of utility? Simmel's answer derives from his general evolutionary perspective. The utility of a system of representations, i.e., a whole way of cognizing the world, depends on whether it helps a species to survive. We accept a system of representations because it helps us to adapt and adjust to the world. Determining truth and falsity is therefore part of the general process of natural selection. We adopt a system of representations or way of thinking not because it corresponds with things, but because acting on it brings about the desired consequences, namely, survival (71–72).

Such was the sum and substance of Simmel's 1895 article. It was a remarkable synthesis of Simmel's Kantianism and Darwinianism. Simmel continued to stress the creative role of the Kantian subject, its decisive importance in constituting the object of experience; but he had naturalized that subject, making its activities part of the general struggle for existence in nature as a whole. Such a naturalistic reformulation of the Kantian subject put a

profound distance between Simmel and the Southwestern neo-Kantians, who had always insisted on the autonomy of the intellectual realm. Despite his great debts to Kant, Simmel was ultimately much closer to the *Lebensphilosophie* of Nietzsche and Dilthey than the neo-Kantianism of Windelband and Rickert.

There is some question whether Simmel remained true to the pragmatism of his 1895 article. In his later years, he reacted against what he now called "pragmatism" because it seemed to deprive the intellectual realm of all independent standards. In a lecture given in January 1918, "Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur",[18] Simmel was highly critical of the new *Lebensphilosophie* which was so appealing to German youth. The most regrettable side of this *Lebensphilosophie*, he lamented, was its attempt to demote the independent validity of the realm of forms. Pragmatism, especially the American variety, was one extreme manifestation of this new philosophy of life, which would make the very criteria of truth depend on the needs of life. It is remarkable that the account Simmel then gave to the rationale behind pragmatism is very much like that of the 1895 article.[19]

Was Simmel, having finally appreciated its radical consequences, renouncing or retreating from his earlier position? Or was he only distancing himself from an excessive and extreme form of it? If so, what constitutes that excessive form and how does it differ from a more moderate form? There are no simple ways of resolving these questions, which raise complex issues we cannot pursue here.[20]

18 See GSG XVI, 181–207.

19 See GSG XVI, 196–197.

20 Jerusalem maintained that Simmel had altered his views. See his "Weiterentwicklung des Pragmatismu", Sp. 3223. Horst Jürgen Helle has argued the case for consistency and continuity. See his *Soziologie und Erkenntnistherie bei Georg Simmel* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buch Gesellschaft, 1988), pp. 60–77.

3

EARLY WORK ON ETHICS

3.1 A Youthful Sin

The crowning work of Simmel's early years was his *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*, which appeared in two volumes, the first in February 1892, the second in October 1893.[1] Although the entire work appeared after *Über sociale Differenzierung* and the first edition of *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Simmel began writing it well before then. The composition of the *Einleitung* dates back to the mid-1880s when Simmel began working on ethics. Apparently, Simmel already had the full conception of the work in mind by the summer of 1886.[2]

Despite the word "Introduction" in its title, which makes it seem like a primer for received doctrine, Simmel's *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* was in the *avant-garde* of moral thinking in the late 19th century. It was among the first works to apply the new historical methods to ethics. Simmel calls his method the "psychological-historical" or "socio-historical" because it would trace the historical and psychological origins of ethical concepts and explain them by their place in society and history. He stresses the central role of the historical method in his work when he writes, in the foreword to the first volume, that the "main point" *(die Hauptsache)* behind its discussion of ethical concepts will be "historical analysis" (III, 10). Rather than assuming

1 Georg Simmel, *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft. Eine Kritik der ethischen Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart and Berlin: Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1892–1893). The work appears as volumes III and IV of the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*. These volumes will be cited in parentheses here.

2 Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), p. 204.

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that ethical concepts are given, as if their meaning were explicable a priori according to logic and intuition alone, Simmel will treat them as the result of history, as playing a definite role in a society at a specific time in its history.

Of course, Simmel's work was not the first to apply the historical method to ethics. There was the precedent of Lazarus "Ueber den Ursprung der Sitten", whose influence on Simmel is apparent everywhere.[3] There was also the precedent of Nietzsche's *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (1878) and *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), works which Simmel never cited but thoroughly absorbed.[4]

Like Nietzsche, Simmel did not hesitate to take his historicism to its radical conclusions. In the *Einleitung* one finds clearly stated and formidably defended the very doctrine the neo-Kantians feared most: a complete ethical relativism. In the remarkable final chapter of the work Simmel argues that the modern world is characterized by a tragic and irresolvable conflict of values.[5] There is no single fundamental principle of ethics that can resolve this conflict, no simple algorithm that can reduce all values down to some common denominator. There is a conflict of values in the modern world corresponding to its many different groups and its long history. It is the tragedy of the modern individual that he or she internalizes this conflict, suffers from it and struggles to resolve it, though all such efforts are in vain.

Though it is rarely read today, even by Simmel scholars, the *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* has a strong claim to be the most important work of the young Simmel.[6] It encapsulates many of his early views and anticipates many of his later ones. The young Simmel rested great hopes upon it. He devoted enormous time and energy to its composition, which lasted for years. Although we do not normally think of Simmel as a moral philosopher, ethics had been his chief preoccupation throughout the late 1880s. Most of his early lectures were on topics in moral philosophy, and most of his early book reviews are on works on ethics. The *Einleitung* finally brought all these efforts and interests to fruition.

There has always been an enormous discrepancy, however, between the actual significance of Simmel's book and its reception. For all its importance, the book suffered a harsh fate. The early English and German reviewers passed

3 "Ueber den Ursprung der Sitten", in *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* I (1860), 437–477. This article was first given as a lecture, March 23, 1860, at the University of Bern. Lazarus anticipates Simmel in several ways: in criticizing ethical egoism and atomism; in demanding a psychological and historical approach to ethical phenomena; and in demanding a critique of the basic ethical concepts.

4 Simmel makes no explicit references to Nietzsche's works. It is revealing, however, that in chapter 2, he adopts Nietzsche's theory in *Zur Geneologie der Moral* that the early words for moral excellence designated the rich, beautiful and fortunate. See GSG III, 99.

5 "Siebentes Kapitel: Einheit und Widerstreit der Zwecke", GSG IV, 284–389.

6 This is also the judgment of Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, p. 167.

damning sentences upon it.[7] While praising the book for its logical acumen and astute observations, they failed to find any unifying purpose or conception behind it. They missed any positive doctrine and were taken aback by its destructive aims. "But this is not so much a theory of Ethics as a theory of its impossibility", wrote John Mackenzie, one early English reviewer.[8] Given such a reception, it is not surprising that the book was not a success. Only 500 copies were printed; and these did not sell quickly. Disappointed, Simmel later disowned the work, which he dubbed a "*Jugendsünde*". He even refused to publish a second edition, claiming that his own views had moved so far beyond it that a completely new work would be necessary.[9] As it happened, the book was reprinted twice, in 1904 and 1911, though it underwent no significant revisions.

3.2 A Patchwork Theory

No one has done more to restore the importance of Simmel's early work on ethics than Klaus Köhnke, who devotes much of his *Der junge Simmel* to a detailed account of its origins, reception and context. Because of its penetrating account of a wealth of historical detail, Köhnke's study is an invaluable resource for the study of Simmel's work. It is disappointing, however, that Köhnke's general estimate of the work is so heavily influenced by its early reviewers. Köhnke too denies that there is any underlying unity to the work; and he argues that the concept of moral science, which appears in its title, was really only a *post facto* device to give the work the semblance of unity.[10] Accordingly, Köhnke develops a "patchwork theory" about the composition of the work, according to which it was stitched together from separate fragments composed in distant intervals.[11] He claims that Simmel begins to expound his own standpoint only at the close of chapter 4 of volume I; but the exposition is then interrupted by chapters 5 and 6 of volume II, which play no crucial role in the whole; only in chapter 7, at the end of the book, does Simmel finally resume the exposition of his own standpoint.

Is Simmel guilty as charged? Is the *Einleitung* really a pastiche, lacking unity and purpose? Any close reader of the work can sympathize with such

7 For some of the early English reviews, see Frisby, *Georg Simmel*: *Critical Assessments* (London: Routledge, 1994) I, 117–128. For a conspectus of the German and English reviews, see Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 170–189.

8 As cited in Köhnke, p. 177.

9 See Simmel to Wilhelm Hertz, February 2, 1901, GSG XXII, 366–367. See also Simmel to Rickert, May 28, 1901, GSG XXII, 393–394.

10 Köknke, *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 179, 189, 205, 208.

11 Hence Köhnke claims here that the work presents *"ein durch zahllose Einschübe weitgehend entstelltes, geradezu kollagenhaftes Gebilde"*. See *Der junge Simmel,* p. 205.

complaints. Simmel's exposition gives the reader little idea of his aims and methods. Rarely does Simmel state his general position, seldom does he explain why he discusses a topic, and never does he reveal the book's general structure. So quickly and deeply does he delve into details that the reader soon loses the forest for the trees. Another challenging feature of the book is its complete lack of references, which makes it difficult to locate Simmel's position *vis-á-vis* his contemporaries. Simmel often takes issue with others, though he never mentions them by name. The book is a virtual palimpsest, written over a hidden polemic against neo-Kantians, neo-Darwinians and positivists; to see this subtext, however, requires careful reconstruction of Simmel's context.

I wish to argue here, however, that, despite its opacity, Simmel's work has unity and purpose after all. It has a single plan and method, which Simmel follows throughout. Furthermore, it has a coherent general position on virtually every important question in ethics. While this position is left implicit, its basic themes reappear in chapter after chapter.

To understand the coherence of Simmel's work, it is important that we keep in mind his intentions in writing it. We must not judge Simmel by goals he did not aim to achieve. Fortunately, Simmel gives a good account of his intentions in several places: at the close of the work, in the prefaces to the first and second volumes, and in a publicity announcement.[12] All these statements reveal that Simmel conceived his work as a *prolegomena* to moral science, not as a work in moral science itself. His work is meant as an introduction not in the sense that it would provide the foundation for moral science, but in the sense that it would be a *preparation* for such a foundation. And, in true Kantian fashion, Simmel understands his prolegomenon as a *critique* rather than a *doctrine*. As a critique, its task is essentially negative and preparatory: to examine the basic concepts of ethics, viz., egoism and altruism, merit and desert, freedom and responsibility, happiness and rationality, personality and character, and to clear away the confusion and fallacies involved in their use. Ethics needs such a critique, Simmel argues, because it is now at a crucial turning point, a stage where it stands between philosophy, which deals a priori with general concepts, and actual empirical science, which provides the observation and description of moral life (IV, 11). The task of critique is to aid ethics in its transition from philosophy to moral science. It does so through revealing the fallacies and simplifications involved in the basic concepts of traditional ethics. These concepts are too abstract and general to do justice to the rich experience of moral life. They are derived from many different sources, and they have a very heterogeneous content, so that there are endless disputes about their real meaning. The most various phenomena are

12 See GSG III, 10–11; IV, 7–11, 386–389; XXII, 389.

explained according to the same principle, the same phenomenon according to very different principles (IV, 9). The only way to end this dire predicament, Simmel believes, is through their thoroughgoing critique.

There can be no question that Simmel keeps to this critical plan throughout the entire book. Chapter after chapter, he critically examines the fundamental concepts of ethics. Some reviewers complained that Simmel's book was more negative than positive, more destructive than constructive; but that was only in keeping with his critical purpose. Though Simmel does not develop the concept of moral science in any detail, that is partly because it is not his intention to do so, and partly because he believed that that had already been done by Lazarus.

In his prefaces, Simmel also provides a clear account of his conception of moral science. The method of moral science proceeds in the opposite direction from traditional ethics. Rather than beginning with the most general concepts, it starts from the description and analysis of moral phenomena and develops its concepts from them (IV, 387). Ethics, whenever it becomes a science, will cease to be a single discipline and it will divide into several special disciplines. It will be in part psychology, in part sociology, and in part history. As psychology, its task is to analyze an individual's feeling, will and judgment; as sociology, its business is to explain the forms and content of social life; and as history, it determines the psychological and social origins of basic moral ideas (III, 10).

Since Simmel conceives of moral science as a conglomeration of several disciplines, Köhnke argues that it was not for him really a discipline at all but only the name for a program for the dissolution of ethics.[13] It is not least for this reason that he thinks "introduction to moral science" is a misleading description of the contents of his work. Still, though not the name for a distinct discipline, "moral science" does have a definite content for Simmel: it designates a specific *way* or *method* of pursuing traditional ethical questions by applying, as appropriate, the methods of the various sciences.

It is important to see, however, Simmel does not use the method of moral science in his book. The book intends to pave the way for the use of that method, but it does not apply it itself. Throughout the work, Simmel does provide many observations from history, anthropology and biology; but since his chief aim is to provide a critique of ethical concepts, he deals on the same a priori level as traditional ethics itself. It is true, therefore, that Simmel does not use a new methodology but simply engages in traditional ethics; but that is only in keeping with his intentions.

13 Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, p. 283.

3.3 General Themes

Although Simmel never summarizes his general views for the reader, there is running throughout the two volumes of *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* a coherent general standpoint, an overall philosophical perspective, which consists of three interlocking themes: voluntarism or anti-rationalism, nominalism and relativism.[14] While these themes are to some extent distinct, they are also closely intertwined. Together, they form a remarkably bleak and negative outlook, though one entirely consistent with Simmel's critical agenda. We will now consider each of these themes and some of their interconnections.

Of these three themes, voluntarism or anti-rationalism is the most powerful and persistent. It announces itself immediately in the first chapter, "*Das Sollen*", where Simmel develops his theory of moral obligation.[15] According to his theory, the moral ought *(das Sollen)* indicates nothing more than an indefinable and indemonstrable feeling, a feeling of constraint that we ought to do, like or approve something (III, 22, 25). Simmel insists that the "ought" does not describe any state of affairs or have any kind of cognitive content; it is not derivable from any specific content because it is applicable to any possible content. We can prove the "oughtness" of a content from some more basic content which we approve or like; but we cannot prove that we ought to approve or like this basic content itself (27). "The last thing that we can explain", as Simmel nicely puts it, "is only the next to the last" (*das Letzte, das wir erklären können, ist das Vorletzte*). In the very first chapter, then, Simmel establishes a clear distinction between "ought" and "is", according to which "ought" is compatible with any possible state of affairs. For Simmel, like Hume, there is nothing logically absurd in demanding the destruction of the entire world rather than enduring a scratch on one's finger. It is on the basis of this distinction that Simmel then insists—again like Hume—that reason cannot determine the ends but only the means for actions. Reason is for Simmel an essentially theoretical power which determines what is or is not the case. It has no capacity, therefore, to determine what ought to be

14 Köhnke sees the general standpoint of the book as that of "naturalism", and regards Simmel's program to dissolve ethics into natural science as essentially positivist. See *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 243–265, 284. This, however, is a misleading conception of Simmel's enterprise. Simmel was far too skeptical of the positivist program to regard his position as naturalistic. In chapter VI, he raises many objections against the positivist attempt to explain psychology according to mechanical laws. See GSG IV, 265–83. As we have seen, this skepticism is all the more apparent in the other early works of the 1890s, especially *Über socialen Differenzierung* and *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*. For the same reason, it is misleading to represent Simmel as a proponent of the explanatory and constructive psychology criticized by Dilthey. See Köhnke, p. 281. Simmel's position on social explanation in *Die Probleme* is in fact very similar to Dilthey's.

15 GSG III, 15–91.

case. What ought to be the case, the ends of human actions, are determinable by the will or feeling alone (III, 307). We can say that the means toward ends are rational or irrational, according to whether they are, or are not, effective strategies for achieving them; but we cannot say that the ends themselves are rational, because it is possible for us to will or desire anything without contradiction (III, 106). For this reason Simmel stresses—flatly contrary to Windelband and the neo-Kantians—that ethics cannot be a normative science. If ethics is a science at all, it has to confine itself to what is the case; it has no business in telling us what ought to be the case. The whole distinction between a normative and explanatory science is bogus, Simmel argues, for the simple reason that there really cannot be any such thing as a normative science. When we lay down norms, we are in the business of willing, approving or liking something. The ethicist can talk about and analyze these actions; but it is not his business to engage in them himself (III, 308).

Simmel's anti-rationalism is especially apparent in the fifth chapter, "*Der kategorische Imperativ*".[16] This chapter has been regarded as an unnecessary disfiguring addition which plays no role in the book's ground plan.[17] It is difficult to see, however, how Simmel could sustain his irrationalism without a critical discussion of Kant's categorical imperative, the most famous and typical form of ethical rationalism. It is indeed in Simmel's many objections against Kant's categorical imperative that we can see the basis for his own skepticism about rationalism. Simmel contends, like many later critics of Kant, that the concept of the categorical imperative, understood in its universal law formulation, is an insufficient basis to determine our duties since the universalizability test can be satisfied by opposing maxims (III, 33). The only way in which Kant derives any specific content from his criterion, Simmel alleges, is by covertly smuggling in considerations of consequences, i.e., by imagining what harm would result if everyone acted in the same manner (III, 39–40, 71). What Kant means by "what I could will as a universal law" is not what I could will psychologically but what I could will consistently or logically. But if the test is only a matter of consistency, Simmel contends, then it is too easy to satisfy it. There is a contradiction only if I will both X and -X; but there is no reason that I have to will one or the other in the first place (75). For example, if I am entrusted with a deposit and value the institution of deposit keeping, I should restore the deposit when requested; yet this is only if I value the institution of deposit keeping, which, logically, I need not do. Simmel also shows in great detail that whether a maxim fails or passes the universalizability test depends on its precise formulation (III, 45–53). If a maxim is formulated in a very general way, neglecting to take into account

16 GSG IV, 15–129.
17 Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, p. 189.

specific circumstances, it might seem immoral; but then we end with an implausible absolutism or rigorism that never allows us to lie, take human life, and so on. If, however, the maxim is formulated in a more specific manner, it seems to pass the test; but then it loses all generality. The irony is that the criterion of universalizability works best when it takes into account more specific circumstances, i.e., when it becomes less universal and more individual (III, 53).

The most troubling aspect of Simmel's anti-rationalism emerges in the final chapter of the book, chapter 7, "*Einheit und Widerstreit der Zwecke*". Here Simmel puts forward his famous doctrine of the irresolvable conflict of values. According to this doctrine, there is no single ultimate end of all human actions, a highest good, and there is no single principle that governs or encapsulates all values (IV, 286–287). Simmel's target here is in part the recent idealist ethic of Windelband and Steinthal, which portrayed society as an organic whole or cultural unity, and which made it the duty of the individual to contribute to that whole.[18] But Simmel's critique was not limited to that target and it was much more wide ranging. He traces the belief in a single ultimate end of human action back to the natural law tradition (IV, 315–317). If all moral values are natural laws, then they should form a systematic unity like that of nature itself. Against this belief, Simmel wields his Humean fork, i.e., his "is-ought" distinction. We can come to accept the reality of incommensurable and conflicting values, he argues, once we realize that values have their origin in the will, and that their status is really something subjective (IV, 317–320). Given that there is no rational test for values like the categorical imperative, we have no recourse but to accept the fact that there can be, at least in principle, conflicting values.

Simmel does not leave his argument here, however, but explains in detail all the different kinds of conflict in value. These conflicts can be logical (because the same value is affirmed and denied) or they can be material or practical (because circumstances allow us to act on only one) (IV, 352). They can take place in the following ways: "next to one another" *(nebeneinander)*, when different groups represent opposing interests (viz., political parties); "after one another" *(nacheinander)*, when persisting values of a past epoch contradict more recent values (viz., the conflict between conservatism and progress); or "over one another" (*übereinander)*, when one circle of values encloses others and overrules them (viz., the duty to humanity versus that of the state, or the duty to the state as opposed to that of the family) (IV, 367).

18 See Simmel's early review of Steinthal's *Allgemeine Ethik*, GSG I, 209–210, summarized in chapter 1, section 5. Simmel is probably also taking aim at Windelband's ethics as expounded in "Vom Prinzip der Moral", *Präludien* II, 161–194.

The most striking and disturbing feature of Simmel's argument, however, is how he relates the conflict of values to the tendencies of modern society. Rather than moving toward a resolution of these conflicts, modern society is moving in the direction of their intensification. Modern society is characterized by differentiation, the growth of a plurality of groups. Where the individual in the past belonged to a few groups (the local community and family), he is now released into civil society which comprises groups of all kinds. This gives extraordinary freedom to the modern individual; but at the same time it makes him the victim of the conflict between these groups. The individual internalizes the norms of the group, and so the conflicts in their values become internal. It is impossible for him to resolve these conflicts on his own because they take place on a group level and are resistant to all the powers of rational thinking. Even when he decides for one value over another, the demands of the subordinate value still nag and trouble him (IV, 384). The conflict of values makes for the tragedy of modern life, and it is simple blindness on the part of philosophy not to recognize it and to provide the comforting illusion that somehow there is some rational means of deciding between these conflicts (IV, 373).

Running alongside and fitting hand-in-glove with Simmel's anti-rationalism is his nominalism, his belief that general terms are only names. This venerable doctrine plays a powerful, though little noticed, role in Simmel's thinking. He was perfectly aware of the doctrine's history, stressed its powerful role in the development of modern science, and duly swore his allegiance to it.[19] Nominalism makes its explicit appearance in chapter 5 when he outlines what he calls "sociological nominalism" (IV, 121–124). This version of nominalism, which he calls "sociological" only because it is applied to groups, affirms the classic doctrine of nominalism according to which general terms are not names for general entities but only marks to calculate with (122–123). All unity in things is the result of the synthesis of the mind, Simmel writes, explicitly re-affirming Kant's own nominalist tendencies (124). In Simmel's hands, as in those of nominalists past, this doctrine becomes a potent critical weapon. Simmel uses it to expose what he regards as the chief fallacy of past ethical thinking: what he calls "*Begriffsrealismus*", i.e., hypostasis, the tacit assumption that general concepts designate abstract entities. For Kant, hypostasis was the chief fallacy of pure reason, and Simmel, true to his Kantian roots, makes this a leitmotif of his critique of ethics past. Simmel finds hypostasis lurking everywhere in traditional ethics: in the belief that the good will has a value apart from its consequences (III, 229); in the assumption that character designates a kind of person, or that the ego refers

19 *Über sociale Differenzierung*, GSG II, 126, 130. Cf. *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaften* GSG IV, 121–124.

to a kind of entity, above and beyond a person's actions and dispositions (III, 264–266; IV, 331–348); in the idea of freedom as a faculty that exists independent of the social institutions of punishment (IV, 209–210, 228); in the doctrine of a *Volksseele* where one believes in the reality of a whole prior to the interactions between individuals (IV, 122); in the traditional doctrine that there is a single goal or end behind all values (IV, 206, 286); in the common belief that human beings have an intrinsic value apart from society (III, 185–187); and, finally, in the idea of property as a kind of thing independent of the state of mind of the possesser (III, 243–245). Last but not least, Simmel finds hypostasis where one might least expect it: in the work of that great critic of hypostasis, Kant himself (IV, 80–81). Kant relapsed into this fallacy, Simmel argues, when he held that only certain values are in accord with reason. If he were true to his voluntarism and nominalism, he would have to admit that anything, in principle, can be a value. Here we see clearly how Simmel's nominalism and anti-rationalism work together.

Closely allied with Simmel's anti-rationalism and nominalism is his relativism. Though Simmel would call his doctrine "relativism" only much later,[20] the doctrine was already fully developed in the *Einleitung*, especially in his "relational" theory of truth (III, 17–19). In the opening passages of chapter 1 he declares that truth is a "relational concept", meaning that truth depends on the *relation* of a representation to the majority of representations in consciousness. We regard a representation as true only if it coheres with other representations, not because it conforms to some object independent of them. The pragmatism already announced itself in earlier works also appears in the *Einleitung*, though now it becomes an explicit part of Simmel's relativism. True representations, he informs us, are simply those that give the results that we desire when we act upon them; and given that there is no reason to prefer one ultimate desire over another, there will be different conceptions of truth itself (III, 18).

Simmel's relativism in the *Einleitung* applies not only to the theoretical or epistemological but also the practical or ethical realm. His ethical relativism appears, of course, in his theory of the irresolvable conflict in values. It is also closely intertwined with his voluntarism, i.e., his thesis that the will alone is the source and sanction of value.[21] Voluntarism alone does not entail relativism, however, because one can still hold that desires and emotions behind values are universal constants of human nature. It was in this way that Hutcheson and Hume had tempered their voluntarism to avoid the relativism of Hobbes and Mandeville. But Simmel chose not to follow this path. For he argues that desires and feelings are the result of historical conditioning, i.e.,

20 See *Philosophie des Geldes*, GSG VI, 117–118.

21 Simmel endorses this theory in its classical formulation, GSG IV, 326.

that the chief forces behind human development are inheritance, tradition and example (III, 31). The belief in a single human nature that somehow persists behind all the different forms of historical and cultural conditioning was for him only an illusion (III, 92, 122).

Voluntarism, nominalism and relativism, the leading themes of Simmel's *Einleitung*, reappear in all his later work. Simmel never renounced but only reaffirmed and refined them. They are one more reason for regarding the *Einleitung* as a foundational work of Simmel's philosophy.

4

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

4.1 Conception, Context and Difficulties of *Die Probleme*

In May 1892, two years after *Über sociale Differenzierung*, Simmel published his most important work on social and historical explanation, his *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*.[1] This work is a classic statement of the idealist theory of historical knowledge. Applying Kantian epistemology to the problems of social and historical explanation, Simmel taught that such understanding is the work of the knowing subject. What Kant demonstrated in the first *Kritik* about physical nature—that the understanding knows nature because it creates it—Simmel now tried to demonstrate for history itself. His work is, therefore, a criticism of what he calls "historical realism", i.e., the theory that history is only an image of a reality which exists independent of the knower. The theory Simmel develops in this work will be the foundation for much of his later sociology.

Simmel's *Probleme* poses two difficulties for its readers. The first difficulty is its dense style, which, to decipher, demands intense concentration. The second difficulty is the discrepancies between its different editions.[2] To avoid confusion, the reader needs to know *which* edition he is reading. There were three editions in Simmel's lifetime: 1892, 1905 and 1907. The 1907 edition differs only slightly from that of 1905: it adds a few notes and makes some stylistic changes. The 1905 edition, however, differs greatly from that of 1892. Simmel considers new problems in the 1905 edition, and he gives

1 Georg Simmel, *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie. Eine erkenntnistheoretische Studie* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1892), GSG II, 297–421.

2 The texts of the 1905/07 editions are in GSG IX, 227–419.

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new more detailed explanations of former problems. The result is a great difference in length: the 1905 edition is 169 pages, whereas the 1892 is only 109. Simmel's whole conception of the work changed in the second edition, because he admitted that the refutation of historical realism was not clear to him when he wrote the first edition.[3] The new clarity about that point meant that he had to rewrite and reorganize the whole book. As late as 1916, Simmel considered writing a fourth edition, but he believed that it would have to be, ultimately, a whole new book with a new title.[4] That new book Simmel never wrote.

To understand why Simmel made such drastic revisions between the 1892 and 1905 editions, it is only necessary to consider the remarkable developments between these editions. When Simmel wrote the first edition of *Probleme* in 1892, the philosophy of social science was still in its infancy. Simmel was writing before Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* (1901), Dilthey's *Ideen über eine Beschreibende und Zergliedernde Psychologie* (1894) and Rickert's *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (1902). One of the most important results of these works was the critique of psychologism and of Dilthey's theory of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. In revising his work, Simmel wanted to take account of these developments. Using a fashionable phrase, he wrote Rickert in November 1904 that one of the most important changes of the new edition would be its "overcoming of psychologism".[5] This phrase was not entirely accurate, he stressed, because he was not so much abandoning psychology as advancing a new conception of it.

Simmel's *Probleme* has been read as the work of a Dilthey disciple, as if it did little more than develop the line of thought Dilthey began in his 1883 *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*.[6] There are indeed close affinities in their positions: both stress the importance of psychology for the human sciences; both are opposed to positivism; and both have a hermeneutics or a theory of internal understanding. But even a quick comparison between Simmel's *Probleme* and Dilthey's *Einleitung* reveals basic divergences in their views. Rather than defending or developing Dilthey's position, Simmel takes issue with it in important ways. Thus, Simmel questions the autonomy of history, which was vital to Dilthey, and he defends the philosophy of history, which Dilthey emphatically opposed in the *Einleitung*. The two respects in which

3 Simmel states his central thesis most clearly in the "Vorwort" to the 1907 edition of this work. See GSG IX, 229–231.

4 Simmel to Rickert, December 26, 1916, GSG XIII, 718.

5 Simmel to Rickert, November 4, 1904, GSG XXII, 504.

6 See Hans Jürgen Helle, *Soziologie und Erkenntnistheorie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), pp. 41, 44; and Ralph Leck, *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000), pp. 64–69.

Simmel and Dilthey seem closest—their emphasis on psychology and internal understanding—are more the result of coincidence than influence. For it was Lazarus, not Dilthey, who had convinced Simmel of the importance of psychology.[7] And Dilthey had barely stated his theory of the understanding in the *Einleitung*, he would develop that theory only later in the 1890s, *after* the first edition of *Die Probleme*.

Although Simmel attempts to extend the Kantian revolution to the social and historical world, he also stresses the need for a revision of the Kantian architectonic. Like Windelband and Rickert, Simmel holds that Kant's architectonic was more appropriate for the natural rather than the social sciences. Its successful application to the historical world demanded its revision, and specifically Kant's sharp dualism between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*. Simmel insists on introducing a new form of the *a priori*, what he calls the "relative a priori", which is to stand between Kant's categories and the intuitions of sensibility (304–308). Apart from the very general categories of the understanding of the first *Kritik*, which apply to any possible content, the historian has to operate with a more specific set of presuppositions, which apply to the more detailed content of human actions. These presuppositions are specific instances of the general categories, the particular ways they are applied to history. However, they are not simply empirical because they determine the conditions of empirical enquiry. The historian presupposes, for example, that actions are the effects of mental causes; without this presupposition, his enquiry could not even begin. Like all *a priori* assumptions, it cannot be confirmed by experience because it is a necessary presupposition for investigating it. Corresponding to this more liberal conception of the *a priori*, Simmel insists that there is no firm and absolute dividing line between the *a priori* and *a posteriori* (304–305). There are many degrees of the *a priori* and many different mixtures of it with its content. There are also gradual degrees of transition between the *a priori* and its material.

4.2 History and Psychology

The first chapter of *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* identifies the subject matter of history.[8] What makes a subject matter historical, Simmel argues, is what he calls its *inwardness* (*Innerlichkeit*). No external events would interest us, nor would they even be comprehensible, he maintains, if they did not proceed from mental events (*Seelenbewegungen*) (303). If history is not to be a puppet play, then it should be the history of mental

7 See Simmel to Lazarus, August 4, 1880, GSG XXII, 9.

8 Erstes Kapitel, "Von den psychologischen Voraussetzungen in der Geschichtsforschung", II, 303–338.

events (*psychischer Vorgänge*). Historical materialism does not challenge this fundamental point, Simmel insists, because even if we succeed in explaining history from physical needs, these would not set history in motion if someone did not first feel hunger; all struggle for economic goods is really a struggle for the feelings of comfort and enjoyment that these goods bring (303–304). The character of soil and climate on earth would be as indifferent as that on Sirius if it did not have an effect on the character of a nation (304).

From this uncontroversial point, Simmel draws a more controversial conclusion: that *if* psychology is a science of laws, then history will be applied psychology (304). This implies that history presupposes psychology, that it is indeed nothing more than applied psychology. This is a controversial claim because, according to neo-Kantian doctrine, history cannot be a science of laws because its content is the singular, unique event. Here Simmel hedges his contention; he makes it hypothetical by saying *if* psychology were a science of laws. Whether that hypothetical is fulfilled, will have to be made out through the future course of the investigation.

Simmel's conception of the inwardness of history raises the question how we can know this inwardness. The simple and standard answer is that we know it by inference from a person's speech and conduct. But Simmel points out that this inference is not as straightforward and unproblematic as it seems (307). We have no direct awareness of the other person's inner states, so we have to collect evidence that implies the existence of an inner state. We supplement what we immediately perceive with what we have perceived in the past and how we assume that people generally behave. Furthermore, the physiology of the senses teaches that the fragmentary impressions of the senses are completed according to our past experience. This spontaneous completion of the fragmentary data of sense with our past experience shows, Simmel concludes, that innerness is not simply read *from* the facts but is read *into* them according to general presuppositions (308).

These examples from ordinary life are simple compared to the much more complicated cases of history, Simmel says. History has the same psychological presuppositions as we have in ordinary life, but their application is more problematic in history because the cases it deals with are in the past and much more complicated. The same inner event can have, because of circumstances, very different consequences (309). Thus Heinrich von Sybel, in his history of the French revolution,[9] showed how the Herbertists supported Robespierre when he used his power to help them. But once he became

9 Heinrich von Sybel, *Geschichte der Revolutionszeit von 1789 bis 1795* (Dusseldorf: Julius Buddeus, 1859), II, 364.

leader of the committee on public safety, they turned against him because they were now under his rule. Thus one and the same cause—appreciation of Robespierre's power—had opposing effects: supporting and opposing Robespierre.

History usually proceeds, Simmel says, by assuming that the visible actions of human beings have non-visible goals and feelings as their causes. We make such assumptions because they put the actions in a broader more intelligible context (312). If, however, we had to remain within the visible evidence, then we could not understand even the most simple action. For every event in history, we assume that it has a conscious psychic cause; we think that the agent has a conscious goal which is formulable in words (313). Often, however, actions have not only conscious but also subconscious causes whose operation we do not understand (313). The most important structures in society—law, morality, language and culture—do not arise just from the will of conscious agents. These structures arise from the work of many hands over many generations, and these agents are rarely conscious of the final goal of their actions (315).

How do we understand the psychic states of others? We do so, Simmel suggests, by copying or replicating (*nachbilden*) these states, by placing ourselves in the soul of the other person (317). The listener understands the speaker when the words of the speaker arouse the same state of the mind in the listener; when there is any essential difference in the representations of speaker and listener, then the words are either misunderstood or not understood at all. There is a copying or replication only when there is some *theoretical* content because here the individuality of the speaker makes no difference to what is understood; speaker and listener relate to the same content because their personalities play no role in shaping the content. But if it is a matter of the subjective feelings or desires of the speaker—a matter of love or hate, courage or despair—then understanding is greatly compromised and complicated. The listener will then understand the speaker only if he or she has had similar feelings and desires (318). Who has never loved cannot understand love; the weakling cannot understand the hero; the choleric never understand the phlegmatic.

Simmel's language of replicating or imitating the inner states of others is misleading because it suggests the very kind of realism that he wants to avoid. It seems as if the object is given, and that the historian simply reproduces it in his own consciousness. Simmel insisted, however, that historical truth was not a mere reproduction of the given, but that it came from a mental activity which made out of its material something that did not exist in itself (IX, 277). What the historian knew of the other was a construction that combined his material into a meaningful whole; that material consisted in fragments of evidence from various sources, viz., external speech and behavior, knowledge of a culture and its history.

As part of his critique of historical realism, Simmel turned against Ranke, who was a chief representative of that standpoint.[10] Ranke went completely astray, Simmel argues, when he demanded that the historian extinguish his own personality in that of the subject matter[11] (321). Without the historian's personality, there would be nothing left to understand. The content of the historian's representations is nothing less than the foundation for understanding the other (322).

The naivete of Ranke's realism is apparent, Simmel thinks, from his famous dictum that the historian should know history simply "as it has been" (*wie es gewesen ist*).[12] That dictum cannot do justice to the varieties of history, to the many different perspectives we can have of the same object (IX, 284–290). We can write a history of the Reformation, for example, from an economic, political or religious standpoint; each of these perspectives is valid but each gives a very different view of the Reformation. There is no such thing as knowledge in general but there is only knowledge from a specific standpoint. Which standpoint we choose depends on our purposes, which dictate the evidence we gather and the criteria of adequacy we apply. The ideals of knowledge we pursue, and even our conceptions of truth, will depend on the subject matter. For example, a history of technology will be very different in its standards of rigor and completeness from a history of morality; a history of art will be very different from a history of the church (IX, 288–289).

Some historians attempt to mitigate the problem of historical knowledge by stressing that the object of historical knowledge is only another person like ourselves (318). Because the other is also a conscious being like ourselves, it might seem that we can know their inner nature better than that of material things. But Simmel insists that this point will only take us so far: "Upon such a slight thread one cannot build a bridge between the self and the not-self" (319). The very general similarity that both self and other are conscious beings does not allow us to dispense with the need of making conjectures and inferences about the mind of the other. The problem is that I still regard what are only representations in me, as also the representations of another person. This, Simmel says, is "the puzzle of historical knowledge" (320).

Simmel posed this puzzle but left it standing in the 1892 edition. In the 1905 edition, he returned to it and then made a conjecture about how it could be solved (IX, 264–266). What justified the self in attributing its reconstructions to the other, he proposed, is a kind of "suprapersonal validity" of the self's feeling for the other, "a validity which had the value of universality

10 The critique of Ranke is more extensive in the 1905 edition. See GSG IX, 287, 294, 295.

11 Ranke, *Englische Geschichte, Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Alfred Dove (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1867–1890), XV, 103.

12 See the preface to his *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, *Werke* XXXIII, vii.

but which was not reducible to logical universality" (IX, 274). The self's feeling for the other extended beyond himself because the content of his representation existed in the other as well as himself (275). Simmel likened the problem here to that of spatial perception: we perceive something *outside* ourselves though it is really only a representation in ourselves. That we saw it as outside ourselves depended on the quality of the representation itself: it was governed by a universal and necessary form independent of the arbitrary associations of the perceived. Similarly, Simmel insisted that it was something in the quality of the subject's representation that made him project its content on someone else. Historical truth was not a mere reproduction but a mental activity which made out of its material—an inner reproduction—something that did not exist in itself (IX, 277). In the end, Simmel admitted that his conjecture was only a first attempt to solve the problem, and that it did more to show the depth of the problem than to solve it (IX, 275).

Because the historian has to feel into the personality of the other, and because he has to reconstruct a whole from the fragments given to him, his creative activity is like that of an artist, Simmel thinks (322). In the 1905 edition, Simmel went much further in likening the historian to the artist (IX, 297f). When the historian attempts to understand a particular personality or culture, he attempts to form its disparate elements into a coherent whole. The crucial question is then: what connects these elements together? The connection is not entirely logical, as if it concerned their content alone, but nor is it entirely psychological, as if it were a matter of the causal connections between them (IX, 273). The historian has to take into account both the logical and psychological connections, but they are still not sufficient to construct the peculiar kind of unity necessary to understand a historical object. What guides the historian here, Simmel finds, is something like an aesthetic intuition, "a feeling of necessity" in tracing the transition from one element to another. Simmel likens this feeling of necessity to what we feel upon reading a good lyric poem. We feel that all the elements somehow belong together into a whole, even though the connection between them is neither logical nor psychological (IX, 267). It is the same feeling of necessity, Simmel suggests, that the historian follows in trying to understand a unique historical personality or epoch. Applying Kant's account of aesthetic judgment from the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Simmel says that the unity we construct in history is communicable but not purely logical or universal; it is a synthetic unity, where the whole precedes the parts, rather than an analytic unity, where the parts precede the whole.

In the 1892 edition of *Probleme*, Simmel made history into applied psychology. The first chapter of the book ended with the declaration "psychology is the a priori of the science of history" (338). But, Simmel soon realized that there were problems with this psychological conception of history. If psychology were a science of laws, then how could history be about the

individual, who was not reducible to a mere assemblage of laws? It was not only a utopian but also a misconceived undertaking, Simmel wrote, to understand the individual as "a mere meeting place for universal psychological laws" (IX, 234). To reconcile the historical individual with psychological laws, Simmel imagines that there are substrata for the psychological laws, which are not reducible to them but which differ for each individual (IX, 235). Such a hypothesis would allow for differences between individuals and it would give reality to the laws, each of which is attributable to a substratum.

Simmel realized that he had to explain in more detail the relationship between psychology and history. In his first edition, he saw psychology in simplistic terms, as a science of the psyche in general. But in the second edition, he realized that psychology is a more complicated science than it first appears to be. There was a psychology of mental acts, but there was also a psychology of mental contents, the object of these acts. In what sense is history a psychological science? In the second 1905 edition of *Probleme*, Simmel decided to investigate more carefully the relationship between history and psychology. "The interest in a psychic occurrence (*Vorgang*) is still not a psychological interest", as he put it somewhat paradoxically. The psychologist was interested in mental activities, the coming and going of mental acts. He was concerned with a mental act or event (*Vorgang*) because it is psychic, but he has no concern with *content* of the act (IX, 236). The content of these acts was the subject of logic or metaphysics, which was at the opposite end of psychology. History fell between psychology and logic. It was concerned not with the content as such but with the psychological *development* of the content. History was, therefore, a medium between logic and psychology, between the logical treatment of mental content and the psychological treatment of mental acts. What we experience is the unity of act and content. We analyze this unity into process and content. The scientific division of labor creates first, psychology to construct the process and its laws; second, logic to construct the content in abstraction from the process; and third, history to study the development by which such content comes into being (XI, 237).

4.3 Laws of History

Chapter 2 of *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, "Von den historischen Gesetzen", concerns the possibility of historical laws. Simmel discussed a similar topic in the first chapter of *Über die sociale Differenzierung* when he treated the laws of sociology. He now considers the possibility of the laws of history. The topics are closely connected, and Simmel comes to the same conclusion as in the earlier work: historical laws, like sociological laws, have to be justified pragmatically.

On this topic, the 1892 and 1905 editions of *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* differ considerably; only a few passages are entirely the

same.[13] The substantive conclusions are the same in both editions; but the expositions are very different. The careful and conscientious student should read both editions.

It is sometimes stated in secondary literature that Simmel simply denies the possibility of historical laws.[14] This is the impression one derives from reading certain passages, but it proves inaccurate if one reads these chapters as a whole and places them in context. Simmel is skeptical of historical laws *in a realist and dogmatic sense*, i.e., if they are read as literal and absolute truths about historical reality. But he allows for the possibility of historical laws provided that they are understood under certain necessary qualifications. As he summarizes his argument:

> All the insufficiencies of historical laws appear when one measures them by the ideal of knowledge; but it is otherwise as soon as one considers the insufficiency of knowledge in general and asks whether what is not absolute knowledge can be a relative stage to such.
>
> *(II, 366–367)*

Simmel's chapters in both editions contain several arguments against historical laws, though they are directed against laws in an unqualified and naïve sense. First, all historical events consist in a multiplicity of elements (II, 341). We can speak of a law behind their occurrence, however, only if all the elements are the same; but that almost never happens. Second, to know if there is a causal connection between A and B, we must determine which factor in A is the cause of B; but it is difficult to isolate one factor, and the factors are changing all the time (IX, 312). Third, in history, we have to infer the cause from its effect (II, 352). But this is a hazardous business. We do not always know which factors in the effect are from the cause, and two very similar causes can have very different effects.

People often speak of historical laws in a very loose sense. Historical sequences are often referred to as laws, though there is no connection between the events (II, 342–344; IX, 318–319). For example, people write of the childhood, youth, manhood and old age of nations; but there is no connection between these stages that is implied, still less shown. People also write about statistical laws, as if it were a law that every year 3% of the population of a country would commit suicide. But there is no necessity that this is the case; the law is only a summary of individual events that happen on average each year (II, 360–366).

13 GSG II, 339–379; GSG IX, 310–358. The second edition has a subtitled section "Anmerkung über individuelle Kausalität", whose argument does not appear in the first edition.

14 See chapter 2, section 2.2.

The realist and positivist theory of historical laws assumes that they consist in certain fundamental elements or units which are incapable of further analysis. Thus, an army or party is analyzed into the individuals who compose it. But there really are no such fundamental units, Simmel maintains, because analysis can always continue in principle (II, 323; IX, 326–327). Complete analysis is an ideal we can approach but never attain (IX, 327). Unity and composition are relative concepts; what is simple from the standpoint of one enquiry will turn out to be complex from another.

It is only a methodological principle of history that there are specifically historical laws, Simmel contends. This is to assume, however, that history develops on its own, isolated from the cosmos in general. But what happens in history often is interfered with, or interrupted by, natural events (IX, 326–327). All human history is really only an abstraction from the cosmos as a whole; we cannot assume that history is a self-enclosed realm whose early stages contain all the germs of its future development (IX, 334–335).

Despite all these problems with historical laws, Simmel does not abandon them. The interests of historical knowledge, or its specific a priori demands, he argues, that we take the group as its unity (IX, 324, 344). If we accept that as its starting point, then there is no reason to think that the complexity of historical phenomena shows the impossibility of historical laws. Of course, it will be difficult to establish these laws; but Simmel thinks that we should assume them as *regulative* principles, i.e., those which we can approach but never attain with the further progress of knowledge. One would have to assume, of course, that the laws of the cosmos are stable and a constant (IX, 336). But these are the kinds of abstractions and operating assumptions any science has to make.

It was the more generous and liberal side of Simmel that he defended the role of philosophy in historical investigations. Whereas Comte and Marx regarded philosophy, specifically metaphysics, as obsolete, relegating it to an inferior stage of knowledge which could be overcome with more exacting empirical research, Simmel insisted that philosophy provides a valuable role in anticipating and organizing research. Philosophy has the role of "a baptizer": it gives suggestions and outlines which others later fulfill (II, 370). Simmel saw the historical laws in the same light: they were deceptive if they were regarded as final results, but as starting and transition points, they were very useful for future research (II, 372).

4.4 Philosophy of History

Chapter 3 of *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, "Vom Sinn der Geschichte",[15] is a defense of the philosophy of history. When Simmel first

15 Cf. GSG II, 380–421; IX, 359–419.

wrote this chapter in the early 1890s, such an ambition was untimely. Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey had attacked the philosophy of history for its grand speculations and a priori methodology, which seemed contrary to the spirit and method of empirical science. That spirit and method dominated the intellectual climate of the latter half of the 19th century. The philosophy of history was, therefore, no longer in fashion. But now, in the 1890s, the *Zeitgeist* was beginning to change her tune. She was turning against the positivists, who had their say for long enough. It was high time to reappraise the philosophy of history. On no account did Simmel intend to defend the old a priori methodology of Fichte and Hegel, but he firmly believed that the positivist critique of the philosophy of history had thrown the baby out with the bathwater. There was still something of great value in the philosophy of history, something which had to be reclaimed: it treated issues about the meaning of life and the significance of history which no empirical research could answer.

Simmel begins by defining the aim and limits of the philosophy of history (II, 380). The philosophy of history concerns the *purpose* and *meaning* of history, its goals and values for human beings within history. Simmel warns us to distinguish goals and values (384). We can say that history is moving toward goals yet deny their value, or we can affirm its value but deny that it is moving toward ends. Nevertheless, goals and values can also coincide, so that one accepts the values of the goals.

Since Simmel distinguishes values from facts, he argues that the question of the purpose and meaning of history goes beyond the limits of empirical research. Even if we knew all the facts of history, he points out, we still would be no closer to determining its purpose or meaning (II, 381; IX, 362). The question of the purpose and meaning of history is also very different from that of the laws of history, Simmel insists (II, 381). Whether there is a law of history is a matter of empirical research; even though verification is an ideal we cannot achieve, it is still possible to pursue it; but the question of the purpose and meaning of history goes beyond all empirical verification in the first place.

Simmel's distinction between philosophy of history and science of history was very strategic. It performed a double task for him: it kept science secure within its boundaries, where it had no reason to fear the incursions of metaphysics; but it also left a realm open for the philosophy of history, where it could be free from scientific censure. The net result was a complete reversal of the positivist legacy. The positivist placed the realm of philosophy *below* that of science, which would eventually replace its obscurantist metaphysics with rigorous scientific laws; but Simmel placed the realm of philosophy *above* that of science because it concerns important issues to human beings which science cannot treat.

Though Simmel's distinction is very strategic, it also raises a problem of its own. By placing metaphysics within its own *sui generis* realm, the distinction

frees metaphysics from the charge of scientific censure; but it also seems to make metaphysics irrelevant or dispensable. If questions about empirical facts can be settled entirely without metaphysics, why bother with metaphysics at all?

It is precisely here, however, that Simmel introduces a new argument regarding the value of metaphysics and the philosophy of history. Although metaphysics is not necessary for the truth of empirical claims—although its doctrines should have no effect upon the content of history—it proves to be necessary to conduct empirical investigation in the first place. Even if all the facts and laws of history are determinable without metaphysics, there is still the question why one should study these facts and laws to begin with. And it is here that metaphysics enters. Metaphysics concerns our ultimate values and commitments, that which gives our lives meaning and significance. If it were not for metaphysics, we would not bother to investigate history at all; its mass of facts and laws would remain indifferent to us. Hence, it is metaphysics that gives us the *motivation* to study history (II, 389–390; IX, 375). It determines the goals of our enquiry, and indeed the subject matter of investigation. In the infinite breadth and depth of historical reality, the historian has to decide which aspects to investigate and which to ignore. What makes him focus on one aspect rather than another is that it seems meaningful and significant, i.e., it has a bearing on those ultimate values and commitments which are reflected in metaphysics.

In the 1890s and early 1900s, it was no longer incumbent for Simmel to write about the German idealists, who dominated the philosophy of history in the first half of the 19th century. Now, in the second half of the century, the philosophy of history had moved forward. But then Simmel would have to say something about the dominant philosophy of history of his age: historical materialism. This was the dominant ideology of socialism, which was a driving force at the turn of the century. Sure enough, at the end of Chapter 3, especially in the 1905 edition,[16] Simmel turns to an examination of the materialist theory of history.

Simmel's chief objection to this theory is that it pretends to be free of metaphysics when it is in fact just as metaphysical as every other philosophy of history. The theory that all historical movement is motivated by economic interests goes beyond the observable surface of appearances (II, 395). If we examine the facts of history, we find that its actors have all kinds of motives, religious, political as well as economic ones, so that the historical materialist cannot say a priori that only the economic motives are decisive

16 See GSG IX, 401–417. The treatment of historical materialism in the second edition is more extensive and thorough than the 1892 edition, which covers only two pages, GSG II, 395–396.

and important. History consists in several strands of events—legal, religious, military, political and economic—each of which can serve to describe history as a whole just as well as the economic (IX, 404). The historical materialist fixates on one strand—the economic—and makes it dominate all the others. He wants to explain everything from an economic perspective, which makes the economy the base and everything else the ideological superstructure; but then what explains changes in the economy itself? (IX, 407). Simmel does not deny that the historical materialist has provided an often fruitful *heuristic* or *regulative* principle which allows us to search for the economic causes of historical change; but he goes astray when he makes his heuristic principle into a metaphysical one, his regulative principle into a constitutive one (IX, 405). The source of Simmel's opposition to historical materialism is his own idealist epistemology, which is the very opposite of the materialist's adherence to a realistic epistemology. The materialist's realism, however, was only another example of his philosophical naivete, his failure to examine his own presuppositions.

4.5 Simmel versus Stammler

In 1896, Simmel published a short article on the methodology of the social sciences, "Zur Methodik der Socialwissenschaft" for Gustav Schmoller's *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich*.[17] This was one of his few forays into the realm of methodology, a topic which he usually shunned. The occasion for his article was a review of Rudolf Stammler's *Wirtschaft und Recht nach der materialistischen Geschichtauffassung*.[18] Despite its brevity and obscure occasion, this was an important article for Simmel. Stammler was a member of the neo-Kantian Marburg School, a colleague of Herman Cohen and Paul Natorp. Here was an opportunity, then, for Simmel to state his views about that school, which sometimes opposed him. Important issues were at stake in an encounter with the neo-Kantians: the criteria for the social, the limitations of historical materialism and the validity of relativism. The neo-Kantian theories about these issues were serious challenges to Simmel's own views on these topics. A reply to Stammler was therefore imperative.

Still, whatever issues divided them, Simmel had good reasons to be sympathetic with Stammler's work. He shared his general Kantian outlook on the social sciences and his critical reserve toward historical materialism. Simmel

17 Georg Simmel, "Zur Methodik der Socialwissenschaft", *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich*, 20 (1896), 575–585. GSG I, 363–376.

18 Rudolf Stammler, *Wirtschaft und Recht nach der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung* (Leipzig: Veit & Comp., 1896).

described Stammler's work as "an application of Kantian methodology to social science", which held that "scientific experience about social things is only possible when certain concepts are presupposed…which make possible the concept of *society*" (364). These were ideas close to Simmel's heart, as he had already defended them in his *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*.

The first part of Stammler's *Wirtschaft und Recht* was a critique of historical materialism.[19] The historical materialists, as Stammler explained them, maintained that the concept of right in a society is the product of its specific economic relations, viz., its forms of production and exchange. Against this view, Stammler countered that right was not the product of social economy but its precondition; without concepts of right, an economy could not even be formed.[20] This was not a *temporal* priority, as if the establishment of a legal system preceded the economy; but it was a *logical* priority because the legal system established the form of the economic system, given that the economy had to take place according to legal regulations. Right and the economy do not stand in a relationship of interaction or reciprocity because the legal rules are the formal side of the object of investigation, whose material is technical production. It is very misleading to claim that the introduction of the steam engine alone was the cause of legal changes because the mere technical form of production has nothing to do with the law. It is only because its introduction took place in an already existing legal framework that one can speak of the destruction of handicrafts and the proletarianization of the masses. Under different legal conditions, the introduction of the steam engine would have very different consequences.

Simmel agrees with Stammler's argument against the historical materialists. He thinks that it captures an important heuristic principle: that every change in technology can have its alleged legal consequences only if it already takes place within an appropriate social order with its legal forms (366). The task is, therefore, not to explain how changes in the economic base gave rise to a legal "superstructure" but to show how the changes in the base, which take place within one legal system, give rise to changes in another legal system. It is then absurd to claim that technical production alone would be the sufficient cause of the legal system. In general, one cannot maintain that the change in one element of a complex system is the exclusive product of another element; any change is the product of complex combination of factors.

As much as Simmel could side with Stammler against the historical materialists, he took issue with Stammler on a basic issue: the criterion of what counts as social. How do we distinguish social phenomena from non-social?

19 *Wirtschaft und Recht*, Einleitung, section 5, pp. 22–24, Erstes Buch, sections 6–13, pp. 27–68.

20 *Wirtschaft und Recht*, pp. 309–312.

That was as crucial as a problem for Stammler as it was for Simmel. Stammler sought that criterion in what he called "external binding norms".[21] What distinguished a social group from a mere crowd or mass of people, what made it the subject of a social science, Stammler argued, is that it was held together through norms. These norms need not be moral or legal, they could even be conventional, but they had to consist in some form of rules or regulations, which were accepted by the members of a group. As Stammler summarized his view: "Social life is an externally ruled living together of human beings".[22]

Simmel questioned Stammler's criterion. It had captured only a secondary feature of social life, an auxiliary or side feature (*Nebenerscheinung*), he claimed, but not its essential or distinguishing feature. What made for a social group was the purpose of its members, their awareness of a common bond or their adherence to a higher principle. The norms, rules and regulations that bound them were a *consequence* of this awareness or adherence but not a *cause* of it (368–369). What brought people together into a social network was "the reciprocally ensured benefit" of their interaction but not their being governed by rules. Regulation by norms was only a condition of keeping an already formed group together, but not a condition of its origin or generation (370).

The most important issue between Simmel and Stammler concerned the possibility of a science of universal right. Like all neo-Kantians, Stammler believed that there could be a science of universal right, a doctrine of universal and necessary legal and moral principles. He regarded such principles as entirely formal, such that they were very general and compatible with the most diverse content; the content, in the form of specific maxims prescribing the ends of conduct, could not be universalized and depended upon very particular and variable circumstances. The form, however, should be universalizable, acceptable to every rational being. Stammler's fundamental ideal was what he called "the community of free willing human beings" (*Die Gemeinschaft frei wollender Menschen*).[23] In this community, "each [person] would make the objective goals of others his own".

Simmel did not want to quarrel with the merits of Stammler's ideal, only with his claim that it was necessary (372). In his belief in the necessity of his ideal, Stammler was led astray, Simmel argued, by an analogy with the sphere of theoretical knowledge. He believed that there had to be a higher principle, a criterion, to distinguish between merely subjective and objective ideas about how to act or to organize a society. In the case of theoretical knowledge, it is indeed the case that there is such a criterion: we regard ideas

21 *Wirtschaft und Recht*, p. 89.
22 *Wirtschaft und Recht*, pp. 90, 108.
23 *Wirtschaft und Recht*, p. 575.

as objective if they correspond with the external world and we dismiss them as subjective if there is no such correspondence; but in the case of the practical realm, there is nothing like an external world that serves as the test of the adequacy of an idea (372). Practical ideas, unlike theoretical ones, have no object beyond themselves to direct and control their legitimacy.

What of the ideal of systematic unity, which Kant had prescribed for practical and theoretical reason? Could this not serve as a criterion of objectivity, where adequate or objective ideas were those which had a necessary connection with the idea of the whole? Simmel did not see how this ideal could be realized according to the Kantian desideratum: a system organized around a single fundamental rule of principle (373). The ideas of theoretical and practical reason were not organized vertically, according to a hierarchy, with a single fundamental principle at the apex; these ideas were organized "next to one another" where they all had equal status and generality. The principle of contradiction, the principle of causality and the mathematical axioms, for example, were all independent of one another; they were not deducible from one another or from a single first principle (373).

Simmel held fast in his belief in a plurality of practical ideas, each of which was valid in its own terms (374). There was individualism versus collectivism, the conservative versus progressive manner of thinking, the instinct to subordinate or to coordinate, the inclinations toward the concrete and those toward the abstract—all these ideas formed their own ultimate criteria of legitimacy, none of which could be judged in terms of the other (374). Every epoch had its own basic convictions and tendencies which could serve as criteria to judge all other ideas and goals as either subjective or objective.

Simmel fears that the quest for a single absolutely valid first principle, in the field of knowledge or practice, can easily lead to skepticism. As soon as one finds that this quest ends in uncertainty, dispute or obscurity, one is tempted into skepticism (375). Rather than embarking on such a dangerous quest, Simmel urges us to realize that objectivity, whether in knowledge or in action, is a *relational* concept which measures the relation between historically *dominant* representations and tendencies to weaker, more transitory or individual ones. In a very instructive footnote, Simmel reminds his readers that a thought is true only in relation to another, not in relation to something lying outside the realm of thought altogether (375n). The whole of thought is no more true than the totality of matter is heavy; it is only in the relationship of parts to one another that things have the properties we attribute to them.

Despite his warning about skepticism, Simmel ends his article on a skeptical note. Even if there really were an absolute first principle, we are still faced with the problem of knowing that it is such a principle; we can have access to it only through the historically dominant representation. The best we can do is treat the highest standpoint we have attained so far *as if* it gave us the objective truth.

5

FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIOLOGY

5.1 The Program of Formal Sociology

In 1894, Simmel made an attempt to define the science of sociology, one which would distinguish it from its kindred and proximate sciences, especially history and psychology. A new attempt was necessary, he believed, because there were efforts to define sociology in terms of these sciences, so that sociology was either psychology or a generalized or collective kind of history. Simmel was convinced that sociology could not be reduced to either of these sciences and that it had to have its own *sui generis* standpoint distinct from them. His attempt at a new definition of sociology appeared in a short article, "Das Problem der Soziologie", published in the *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich*.[1] This article is important in Simmel's *corpus*: it outlines the program of formal sociology which would provide the basis for his later sociology.[2] For reasons we shall soon see, this program proved very controversial.

Simmel begins by sketching the broad historical background for a new definition. The most important progress of the science of history in our time,

1 "Das Problem der Soziologie", *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich*, Jahrgang 18, Heft 4, (1894) 1301–1307. GSG V, 52–61. All references in parentheses refer to this text. A translation of this essay appears in *Georg Simmel 1858–1918*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959), pp. 310–336.

2 According to Elizabeth Goodstein, this article marks "Simmel's intellectual evolution away from his early reductive materialism and evolutionism". See her *Georg Simmel and the Disciplinary Imaginary* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), p. 68. This is very problematic, however, because Simmel was never a materialist, at any point in his development, and because the critique of individualism had appeared earlier in *Ueber sociale Differenzierung*.

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he writes, is the overcoming of the individualist standpoint. That standpoint saw the individual as the basic unit and subject matter of history and psychology. We now see, however, that the individual as such does not exist, and that the individual is only part of his or her social group; taken apart from the group, the individual is only an abstraction. Thus, the science of human beings has become the science of human society, according to which the whole precedes its parts (52).

Simmel emphasizes that such holism is a regulative principle for *all* the human sciences. All these sciences must proceed on the assumption that their basic unit is defined by its place in the whole of society. For just his reason, though, this principle cannot be the principle of an independent science. If sociology is to be an independent science of its own, distinguished from other human sciences, it cannot be just a name for the holistic approach that treats every individual as a member of a group. That approach is common to all the human sciences, and so cannot define any single science (52). To be a science of its own, sociology must be a science on par with, but distinct from, other human sciences. But what, then, is definitive of its approach? How is it distinct from psychology, law or history?

To be a specific science, Simmel proposes, sociology must treat what is distinctively social, i.e., the forms of socialization as such, in abstraction from individual interests and contents that take place through them (54). These interests and contents form the basis of other sciences, but sociology alone concerns the *forms* of socialization. The particular interests and goals, without which no socialization occurs, are the *material* of the social process; the interactions of people, by which these interests and goals are realized, are the *form* of this process. The existence of a specifically social science rests upon abstracting this form from its content. That such an abstraction is possible, Simmel thinks, is clear from the fact that the same form, the same kind of socialization, can take place for the most different kind of material (54). For the most different kinds of groups, we see the same forms take place, viz., subordination, imitation, competition, hierarchy and division of labor.

Simmel accepts that form and content are melted together in a particular historical phenomenon (56). There is no social constitution or development that is merely social and that is not at the same time the constitution or development of a particular content. Nevertheless, he insists that this unification of form and content, as it appears in historical reality, does not prevent their separation. Just as geometry considers the mere spatial form of a body, which does not exist on its own but only in some matter, so sociology considers the form of social interaction apart from the interests and motives of people who enter into it. The sociologist abstracts the social moment from the totality of history; he seeks to find what is "social" in society (57).

It is unclear exactly how far Simmel is willing to push his formal definition of sociology. Sociology does not seem entirely separable from psychology, on

his reckoning, because he says that the methods used to investigate socialization are the same as "all comparative psychological sciences" (58). One must admit certain psychological presuppositions, those without which no historical science can exist, e.g., the phenomena of love and hate, pleonexia and charity, sympathy in belonging to a group and so on. We need to make these kinds of assumptions, Simmel says, to explain why people form societies in the first place.

However closely affiliated with psychology, Simmel wants to distinguish sociology sharply from the philosophy of history (59–60). The philosophy of history wants to bring historical facts under general concepts which serve metaphysical, religious or aesthetic needs. Sociology, however, claims to stick to the facts and their immediate psychological interpretation. There is no longer any doubt in Simmel's mind that it is impossible to find "the laws of history" (60).[3] There cannot be any unifying formula for the development of history in general. In rejecting the connection between sociology and the philosophy of history, Simmel distinguished his position from those of Comte and Marx, who, in his opinion, tied sociology too closely with the philosophy of history, and who, therefore, compromised the status of sociology as an empirical science.

The basic question raised by Simmel's program is whether it provides for a sufficiently substantial conception of sociology. To just study the forms of social interaction for their own sake, abstracted from the interests and goals behind them, would seem to make sociology a very sparse and sterile, anemic and abstract, science. According to Pitirim Sorokin, for example, Simmel's formal sociology would result in "a purely scholastic and dead science, a kind of almost useless catalogue of human relations".[4] And according to Emile Durkheim, Simmel's definition of form is nothing better than the metaphor of a container empty of its contents, so that ultimately "the subject matter of sociology lacks all specificity whatever".[5] In a sharp reaction against such criticism, F. H. Tenbruck has argued that Simmel never meant that sociology should study forms on their own but always insisted that the forms should be understood through their concrete realizations.[6]

3 Simmel refers to his earlier discussion in chapter 2 of *Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*. But there Simmel defended the possibility of sociological laws if they were understood not in a strict sense but pragmatically. Here he must be excluding their possibility in the strict sense.

4 Pitirim Sorokin, *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928), p. 513. See also Samuel Koenig, *Man and Society* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1957), p. 250.

5 Emile Durkheim, "Sociology and Its Scientific Field", in *Emile Durkheim, 1858–1917*, ed. Kurt Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1960), pp. 355–356.

6 F. H. Tenbruck, "Formal Sociology", in *Georg Simmel, 1858–1918*, ed. Kurt Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959), pp. 61–99, esp. 75.

On purely textual grounds, it is impossible to side with either party in this dispute. Tenbruck is correct that social forms must be understood through their embodiments; as we have just seen above, Simmel insists that sociology must use the methods of "all comparative psychological sciences" to explain why people form societies in the first place. Yet Simmel also stresses that forms can be abstracted from their content, that the same form can be applied to diverse content, and that the form alone makes for social phenomena. Ultimately, it is necessary to admit that Simmel swithered and dithered on this question and did not decisively resolve it.

Both parties to the dispute failed to pay sufficient attention to Simmel's own technical understanding of form: it is not an abstract universal nor a class concept; rather, it is the interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) between particulars, a relational concept reducible neither to a set of individuals nor a general concept. More precisely, form is *a pattern of interaction* for Simmel, a concept sufficiently rich to be the subject of sociology as an empirical science.

5.2 *Die Grosse Soziologie*

In June 1908, Simmel published his chief work on sociology, his *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*.[7] It was a long time in coming. Simmel wrote his colleague Célestin Bouglé, March 22, 1908, that work on this volume had taken 15 years.[8] In saying, this Simmel took his starting point to be the Autumn of 1894 when he published his "Das Problem der Soziologie". That article was the ground plan for his "future sociology", as he called it in 1896.[9] Remarkably, though, from 1897 to 1901, Simmel stopped working on his *Soziologie*. There were two reasons for this: first, Simmel became preoccupied with his *Philosophie des Geldes*, which took more time than he anticipated; second, he began to have doubts about whether sociology would be recognized by the academic and political establishment in Germany.[10] It was at this time that he confessed to Bouglé that he was primarily a philosopher rather than a sociologist. After publication of the *Philosophie des Geldes* in December 1900, Simmel went back to work, somewhat reluctantly, on his *Soziologie* in the early months of 1901. He wrote of "a not very sympathetic but inescapable obligation" to finish it.[11] As it happened, the composition of the work took another seven years.

7 Georg Simmel, *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1908). This is volume XI of GSG, which will be cited here.

8 GSG XXII, 619.

9 Simmel to Bouglé, November 1896, GSG XXII, 229.

10 Here I follow the analysis of Otthein Rammstedt in his "Editorischer Bericht" appended to volume XI of the *Simmel Gesamtausgabe*, p. 886.

11 Simmel to Heinrich Rickert, May 28, 1901, GSG XXII, 383.

Simmel's "*grosse Soziologie*", as he called the work, was divided into eight parts, five of which had one or more excursus appended to them. The work is essentially a compendium of Simmel's earlier articles, which were published separately years before. Most of the chapters are devoted to specific sociological issues, which therefore do not concern us in this book; only the first chapter and its excursi deal with properly philosophical issues, which will, therefore, be our subject here.

In his first chapter, Simmel begins with an account of the origins of sociology (13–15). Sociology arose, he writes, when it proved to be impossible to explain social or historical facts—the contents of culture, the kinds of economy and the norms of morality—from the individual alone. It proved necessary also to take into account the *relations* between individuals, to consider that human beings are formed through their *interactions* with one another. Human beings are not self-sufficient entities; they are not atoms each of which has its needs, interests and powers independent of others. Rather, what they are is determined by the specific society in which they live and by its place in history. Sociology arose, then, from the insight that human beings are social and historical beings, and that society and history are the matrices in which they are formed.

As Simmel portrays it, sociology arose from a reaction against atomism, i.e., the doctrine that society is composed of discrete individuals, each of which has a fixed nature apart from the society which forms it. According to atomism, then, there is a universal human nature, which is the same in all societies and cultures. This doctrine played an essential role in the social contract theories of the 17th and 18th centuries, which assumed that all human beings had the same basic needs and that they agreed on the basic principles on how to satisfy them. This doctrine presupposed that society is an aggregate or composite where the parts, each of which is self-sufficient, precede the whole. Sociology was reversing this paradigm: the whole, which defines each of its parts, precedes the parts. In medieval terms, this was the difference between a *compositum*, where the parts are self-sufficient and therefore precede the whole, and a *totum*, where the whole is self-sufficient and therefore precedes the parts. Speaking in very broad terms, sociology arose from a paradigm shift, a move away from the whole as a *compositum* to the whole as a *totum*. Though Simmel himself does not use these terms, they help to understand the very broad change in intellectual perspective which sociology involved.

The early conception of sociology led to a serious misconception, Simmel thinks. Because all human thought and action takes place in society, it seems as if every human science must be a part of sociology. Ethics, aesthetics, history, economics, politics and religion then all seem to be aspects of sociology. This argument is worthless, however, because one might as well make chemistry, botany and astronomy parts of psychology because they are all contents of the human mind. This broad concept of sociology is really empty,

Simmel argues, because it is only a new name for all the specific sciences, whose content and procedures remain the same (14–15).

Sociology does not need for its legitimation, Simmel argues, the discovery of a new object, the finding of some subject matter not treated by other sciences (16). All the objects of science have already been discovered, so that there is no new object of science. What is new to sociology is not its object but its method, its way of considering (*Betrachtungsweise*) things already discovered (15, 16). Just because it is a new method to be used and applied by all the sciences, it is not a new science itself (16). It is no more a new science than induction, a method of all empirical sciences, is a science itself.

No sooner does Simmel make this argument than he raises the question: "What is the new object whose investigation makes sociology an independent science?" (16). We were just told that there is no specific object that forms the subject matter of sociology; but now we are asked what this object might be! We are soon given an answer: it is what is designated by the concept of society (*Gesellschaft*) (17). Sociology is therefore the science of society. Society exists wherever several individuals exist in interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) with one another.

The upshot of Simmel's argument so far is that there is a tension in his definition of sociology. Sociology designates both a method and an object. The method does not refer to any object but is only a way of considering one; but sociology is also defined by a definite or specific object, namely society.

Simmel states that the concept of society, which forms the basis of sociology, is analyzable into form and content (17). He admits that this distinction is only a metaphor and that each of its elements arises only from abstraction; nevertheless, he keeps it to make clear the logical difference between these elements. The form arises whenever several individuals exist in interaction with one another. The content consists in the drives, interests and needs for which individuals interact with one another (18). It is necessary to distinguish form and content because there can be one form for the most diverse contents, and one content for the most diverse forms (21). Although it is necessary to make this distinction for logical reasons, Simmel insists that form and content are *in reality* inseparable from one another (19).

Corresponding to this distinction, the concept of society has two different meanings, Simmel says (23). It can be the complex of *individuals* who are in association with one another, i.e., the socially formed human material (*Menschenmaterial*), as it is in historical reality. Or it can be the sum of all those *relations* by means of which individuals associate with one another. In the first sense, the science of society is defined by its *object*, by the people who form the society; in the second sense, it is defined by its *form*. This distinction seems to resolve the tension between Simmel's two ways of defining sociology. It makes the definitions of sociology in terms of its object or method dissolve into two different meanings of society itself.

Although Simmel initially distinguishes between the form and content of society, so that both should equally be the subject matter of sociology, his exposition tends toward making form alone the subject matter *sensu strictissimo* (23). Sociology then turns out to be "the abstract universal concept for the forms, the genus whose species are these forms, or the actual sum of them" (24). Contrary to his insistence that the form and content are inseparable, Simmel insists that sociology can and should be a science of the *forms* of socialization alone. Sociology leaves its content, he says, to other sciences (25).

This move is problematic, however, and pushes the whole idea of sociology into a surreal direction. Simmel is seduced by the analogy with geometry, which can consider figures in their pure and abstract shapes, apart from how they are instantiated by any real example. He realizes that "the sociological forms, if they are to be definite, can hold for only a relatively small circle of phenomena" (25). Little is won, he admits, if one argues, for example, that the forms super/subordination are found in all societies; one needs to examine the individual forms of these relations (25–26).

Although Simmel seems inclined to push sociology into a treatment of the most general forms of socialization, he also recognizes that these general forms are built and depend upon smaller interactions between individuals (33). The stuff of society consists in what he calls its "microscopic-molecular events" which gather together and congeal into its "macroscopic and fixed unities and systems". Among these microscopic events, he lists: people looking at one another, writing letters to one another, eating with one another, helping one another and so on; it is these kinds of events, woven together in all kinds of ways, that make up the basis of society. They should be the subject matter of psychology no less than the larger events and structures, Simmel thinks. And so he indeed wrote about them, in essays on fashion, marriage, prostitution and so on.

Mindful of these more molecular interactions, Simmel found it necessary to consider the role of psychology in sociology. These interactions have psychological motives and causes, so that the role of psychology in sociology becomes irrepressible. He admitted that the phenomenon of socialization was indeed psychological: "Now there is no doubt that all social events and instincts have their seat in the soul, that socialization is a psychic phenomenon…" (35). Social actions would be no more meaningful than the movements of the clouds, he maintains, if we did not consider the mental motives, feelings and needs behind them. This point was reminiscent of his philosophy of history, when he argued that historical events have to be understood through their psychological motivations. Simmel seemed to be on the verge of making sociology into a branch of psychology. But he stops short of this by making two points. First, that the scientific treatment of mental facts need not be psychology if it treats not mental events but mental content (36).

Second, that sociology can leave aside all mental events and consider their content solely under the concept of socialization (37). One might consider, for example, relations of subordination for themselves without treating the attitudes or feelings of the people who live under them. Although it is necessary to consider these attitudes or feelings for a full treatment of the facts, they are not necessary for the purposes of sociological understanding (38).

5.3 Excursus to Chapter 1

It is one of the outstanding characteristics of Simmel's sociology that he connected it with, and indeed saw it as part of, philosophy. There is no positivist pretense that sociology should be a strictly empirical discipline. Simmel knows that empirical questions are connected with epistemological and metaphysical ones. This philosophical awareness appears explicitly at the end of the first chapter of *Soziologie*. Sociology is bordered by two philosophical spheres, Simmel writes (39). One is epistemological, which concerns the presuppositions and basic concepts of specific investigations; the other is metaphysical, which deals with the interrelations between specific investigations. Simmel admits that some of the metaphysical questions do not belong strictly to sociology; but whether one recognizes philosophy as a science or not, he says, the philosophy of society has no right to withdraw its belonging to philosophy in general (41).

Attached to the first chapter of Simmel's *Soziologie* is an excursus, which is entitled "How is society possible?" The excursus reveals the extent to which Simmel connects sociology with philosophy. Simmel attempts to explicate the conditions for the possibility of society just as Kant had once investigated the conditions of the possibility of nature.

The Kantian question "How is nature possible?" has its counterpart in the question "How is society possible?", Simmel says. Just as there are a priori conditions for the possibility of nature, so, it would seem, there are a priori conditions for the possibility of society. The analogy seems plausible enough, but Simmel immediately notes an important difference between the two kinds of conditions, the two kind of unities, nature and society. There is a decisive difference between the unity of society and the unity of nature: the unity of nature arises from the reflecting subject alone, whereas the unity of society arises from its elements, each of which is conscious and none of which require a reflective subject outside them (43). Kant's principle that connection cannot lie in things themselves but arises from the subject alone does not hold for social connection, Simmel contends, because here the connection lies in the things themselves which are "individual souls" (43). The unification does not require any factor beyond its elements because each of these can exercise the function of the spectator.

Simmel maintains that there is a major difference between human beings and natural things from the standpoint of the social scientist (44). Things in nature are further apart from one another than human beings, who can be united in understanding, love and work. The spatial world shows no such unity because everything is separated in space, and no two beings can occupy the same space. On the other hand, the elements of the spatial world come *in the consciousness of the spectator* to a greater unity than human beings by themselves because they are all formed into one consciousness. In the case of human beings, the fact that the elements of the synthesis are independent beings, each of which has a center of consciousness, means that they do not have that synthesis in the spectator that inanimate things have (44).

However, Simmel's formulation of the problem overlooks something essential. From the viewpoint of the spectator, who is here the social scientist, there is no fundamental difference between humans and natural beings. He treats human beings from the same third-person standpoint as natural things; the fact that they are human beings like himself does not matter from his standpoint; he has no concern with the viewpoints of human beings, who are only the subject matter of his generalizations.

Simmel has another formulation, though, which comes closer to the heart of the problem. Society is "my representation" in a very different sense from the external world, he says (44). In society, each person has the same reality as myself, a reality distinct from a material thing. When Kant claimed in the "Refutation of Idealism" that the reality of spatial objects is as certain as the reality of my representations of them, he was referring to the *contents* of my subjective consciousness, to my representations of the external world; the foundation of these representations, the "I think" of the unity of apperception, has an unconditional certainty greater than all those representations (45). But corresponding to the "I" of the unity of apperception, there is "the fact of the Thou" (*die Tatsache des Du*) which has the same certainty as my own existence. It is precisely here, Simmel argues, that the problem of socialization arises, because the "Thou" that is the product of my representation is nevertheless not resolvable into my representation (45). In other words, I know the other only as my representation; but it should be equivalent, in its epistemic and moral status, to myself. This, in conventional philosophy, is known as the problem of other minds.

This problem was nothing new in the German idealist tradition. Kant had not really faced it. He had suggested only that "I" "transfers" its reality to other beings who appear like it, but he left things at this metaphor. Fichte, Schelling and Hegel were deeply concerned with the problem; both argued that the condition of my self-consciousness is that I attribute an equal and independent reality to others. Simmel makes no mention of their efforts, though he certainly knew of them.

Having explained the different conditions for the consciousness of society over nature, Simmel proceeds to lay down the categories that make socialization, or the consciousness of society, possible (47). There are three such categories, each of which he designates with a Roman numeral.

I We never see the other directly and entirely. What we see is generalized from the very partial representations we have of him (49). It is as if every human being has a point of individuality inside itself, which cannot be replicated by another. We know people through their social roles but not as they are in themselves (50). Complete knowledge of the individuality of the other is therefore denied us (48). We have as a *heuristic* principle the knowledge of someone's individuality; but its demands we cannot ever really fulfill.

II Every element of a group is not only part of it but also something outside it (51). The manner in which he or she belongs to a group is conditioned by the manner in which he or she does not belong to the group. There are indeed some types whose existence is determined by the fact that they do not belong to the group, vis., the foreigner, the enemy, the criminal and even the poor. The a priori of social life is that life is not entirely social; we form our interactions with others with the reservation that there is part of ourselves that is not within them (53). Our concept of society is formed by an image of beings that are both inside and outside it; we are placed in no order that we cannot see outside ourselves.

III Social life presupposes a harmony between the individual and the social whole (59). We think that there is a position in society which is just right for each individual, so that he can contribute to the whole through his individuality and through no sacrifice of his own. This is the ideal of a vocation.

5.4 Basic Questions in Sociology

In 1917, Simmel published Volume 101 of the *Sammlung Göschen*, which he entitled *Grundfragen der Soziologie*.[12] The aim of the *Sammlung Göschen* was to provide introductions to all branches of learning. Simmel had already contributed to this series in 1910 with his *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*, which had already sold some 31,000 copies; it was no wonder that Göschen was eager to sign him up for another performance.[13]

12 Georg Simmel, *Grundfragen der Soziologie* (Berlin and Leipzig: G.J. Göschen'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1917). Sammlung Göschen, Band 101.

13 On the history of the publication, see Gregor Fitzi and Otthein Rammstedt, GSG XVI, 432–436.

Because it was an introduction, much of *Grundfragen* covers ground already covered in previous publications. Nevertheless, it was still useful to have new perspectives on old material. In this respect, *Grundfragen* does not disappoint.

Simmel began with the classic difficulty of sociology: that its rank as a science has been contested (62). Sociology claims to be the science of society; but the very concept of society creates difficulties which make it seem impossible for there to be a science of it. This concept creates two problems; it seems both too weak and too strong. It is too weak because it denotes only the sum of individuals, who alone exist; so the concept by itself is only an abstraction; it does not designate any special kind of object but only the individuals who compose it (63). And it is too strong because everything human takes place in society; so there is no human science that does not fall under the science of society. The particular social sciences—history, psychology and law—are all parts of sociology, which unifies them all through the concept of socialization (63). This latter attempt to give all social content to sociology fails, however, because all the particular social sciences can carry on their business as usual apart from another science of sociology; it adds nothing to throw all these sciences together into a pot and to give them the label sociology (63).

Concerning the first problem, that the concept of society is too weak, Simmel says that it is a misconception of science to think that all discourse beyond individuals ends in abstractions and irrealities (63–64). Science deals all the time with objects that have no counterpart in reality. No one stops talking about the development of gothic style, for example, even though that style does not exist as such but only in individual works as one element alongside others (64). When we speak of the battle between Greeks and Persians at Marathon, we are not talking about what every individual Greek and Persian thought and did at that battle; rather, we are referring to the Greeks and Persians in general (64–65). We gain knowledge of these topics at a general level, Simmel implies, without having to translate it into individual terms.

Simmel goes even further: he denies that individuals are really the ultimate elements, or "atoms", of the human world. We cannot know individuals as such, he claims, but only their particular traits, which we abstract from the individual as a whole. What we regard as ultimate elements are really analyzable into further elements, which together form complex structures (66). The search for ultimate elements or units we eventually push into the unfathomable because every element or unit is further analyzable. The nominalist critique of the concept of society lets all knowable reality disappear (66).

It has to be admitted, Simmel says, that human existence takes place only among individuals; but this should not mean that the concept of society has no value or point (68). The concept of society means, in its widest sense, the interchange (*Wechselwirkung*) among individuals (68). These interchanges can be very momentary, and between few individuals, but they still take place

in society. They can be momentary glances, or hostile shoves at the box office. There is no need that these interchanges have to be continual or lasting (68). "The socialization among people continually connects and loosens, and connects again; it is an eternally pulsing that binds together individuals, even when it does not ascend to proper organizations" (69). Society is made up of all these smaller interactions which are momentary and to which we give no importance. But it is wrong to ignore them, Simmel argues, because doing so would be like analyzing the body into its major organs while ignoring all the smaller cellular interactions which go into its health (69).

Because society is formed through the interactions between individuals, we should speak not of society but of socialization (*Vergesellschaften*), Simmel says (70). This means that, strictly speaking, society is not a substance but an event (*ein Geschehen*). It has the function of giving to, and receiving from, individuals. Simmel then comes to the general definition: "Society is the name for a circle of individuals, who are bound together through their interchanges and which one therefore designates as a unity…" (70).

All sciences take out of the totality of experience, or the immediacy of phenomena, one aspect or side according to a definite concept. Sociology does the same, and it is therefore no less legitimate than the other sciences (71). It raises the question: what happens with human beings, according to which rules do they behave, not insofar as they form the whole of their individual existence but insofar as they form groups through their interaction? The insight that a human being, in his essence and in all his actions, is formed in interaction with others is the new viewpoint of sociology among all the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) (72).

Having treated the first problem, Simmel then turns to the second: that the concept of society is so strong and broad that all particular human sciences fall under it, so that it seems as if sociology is only a new name for all these sciences. To this problem, Simmel responds that sociology is not a science with its own objects but that it is a method of treating them; it is a new way of considering all the content of the individual sciences (72–73). These sciences do not have to abandon their standpoint so that they are only parts of sociology; rather, sociology adapts itself to each of their standpoints. Just as induction is a method of all the particular sciences but not a particular science itself, so sociology is a method of all the human sciences (73). In holding that the human being is a social being, and that society is the basis of all historical events, sociology does not have a special object but is a method of science; just insofar as it is applicable to all particular domains, it does not comprise a particular domain itself (73–74).

Here we encounter the same tension that seemed to afflict Simmel's *Soziologie*: that the specific object or subject matter of sociology is society, the interaction of people in a group; but that sociology also has no specific object or subject matter but is only a method, a way of treating people in interaction

with one another. Simmel again suggests no way of resolving this apparent tension. The tension disappears only when we realize that the apparent object or subject matter is really only a way of speaking, a hypostatization of the specific method or viewpoint of investigation.

Simmel thinks that just because sociology has a universal perspective, just because it can unite different sciences from the single viewpoint of socialization, it has the power to show the interconnections between different human sciences (74). For example, the historian might explain the individualism of the Italian early Renaissance from the liberation of the economy from guilds and the church; the art historian might see the same individualism in paintings and sculptures, but both perspectives reveal one social tendency—the liberation of the individual from medieval constraints—at work in the economy and art (75). Simmel draws an interesting, controversial conclusion from this apparently humdrum point. He suggests that the economy does not have the dominating importance given to it by the Marxists, that the economy is "perhaps" only "the superstructure" (*Überbau*) of the social "base" (76). Simmel does not want to claim that sociology is the best or only perspective to view social developments; the sociologist's perspective is, like all perspectives, only partial (78). Nevertheless, Simmel is implying that the Marxist emphasis on the economy is not any more privileged than any other and that, in some respects, sociology can provide a more illuminating and comprehensive perspective.

Toward the close of his first chapter, Simmel outlines the various parts of sociology which he will expound in his book. One of these parts is original and controversial, but it is all too typical of him as a philosopher. Unlike Marx and Comte, who wanted to stress the purely scientific side of the discipline, Simmel thinks that there is a *philosophical* part of sociology. This philosophical sociology has two sides: one is epistemological and the other is metaphysical. The epistemological side investigates the presuppositions, basic concepts and conditions of individual investigations; the metaphysical side considers hypotheses and speculations to overcome the fragmentary character of empirical investigation. In both respects, Simmel goes beyond the empirical boundaries that most sociologists imposed on their discipline; he realized that such limits could not prevent the attempt to answer inevitable questions.

5.5 Understanding Other Minds

In his *Soziologie*, Simmel attached an excursus treating the question "How is society possible?". There he had discussed the infamous problem of knowledge of other minds, but he left his position on that problem unresolved. He had shown that we never know other minds completely and directly; but that still left the question how we know that there are other minds at all. Simmel

finally turned to that problem in a work he published in 1918, the last year of his life: *Vom Wesen des historischen Verstehens*.[14]

Simmel is a critic of the theory that our knowledge of other minds depends upon empathy, our power to reconstruct the experience of the other from our own inner experience (160). According to this theory, all knowledge of what goes on in the mind of the other comes from an insertion of our own lived inner experiences (*eine Hineinverlegung selbsterlebter Innenereignisse*) into the other (155). To impute a feeling, desire or thought to the mind of the other, I must first have experienced something similar to myself. The basis of all understanding is therefore a similarity between the mind of the subject and that of the object. "The understanding of historical persons presupposes, however different they are from me, an essential similarity between us both" (155).

This theory seems confirmed from common knowledge (155–156). We say that someone who has never loved or hated cannot understand the lover or hater. We also say that the practical man cannot understand the idealist, that a phlegmatic person cannot understand the moods of a sanguine person, that a philistine cannot understand a Mirabeau or Napoleon. It also seems common sense that the modern man cannot understand the Athenian of the Persian wars, the medieval monk or the court society painted by Watteau.

Nevertheless, despite all these apparent facts, Simmel is suspicious of the inference that understanding arises from the similarity between subject and object (156). These facts show only that a degree of difference between subject and object hinders understanding; but it does not follow from this that complete similarity gives understanding. We all too often see that people of a very similar mentality still have the greatest misunderstandings (156). Similarity might be a *necessary* condition of understanding another, because if minds were completely unalike there would be no basis of understanding; but similarity is still not a *sufficient* condition of understanding because I might not understand people who are completely like me.

One premise of the theory of empathy is that our own experiences are completely intelligible to ourselves, that we can understand others because we can at least understand ourselves (158). But Simmel questions whether this is really the case: "For how often do we stand incomprehensible before our own past; how often can the mature man understand the actions and feelings of his youth?". This shows that the transfer of our own inner experiences into the mind of another cannot be the key for the understanding of historical personalities.

Simmel thinks that the theory that understanding is based upon empathy just assumes what it has to prove. It assumes that I already know which part

14 Georg Simmel, *Vom Wesen des historischen Verstehens* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1918).

of my experience I should feel into the mind of the other (160). What is given as my experience is very complicated and involved, and from it, I have to select which aspects are relevant to understand the mind of the other. But how do I know which aspects are relevant?

Simmel maintains that the theory of empathy is based on a mechanistic and dualistic understanding of human beings (163, 178). It assumes that there is a dualism between the mind and the body; it then has to reconstruct the mind of another from physical evidence, so that it makes inferences from a physical to a mental realm. It also analyzes human experience into discrete self-sufficient parts, which it then has to combine to reconstruct it as a whole. These kinds of assumptions make it impossible to account for understanding, which takes place between whole living human beings. What we perceive in the other, Simmel assures us, is the whole person, which we only later analyze into its parts (157). This perception is at first a confused and obscure intuition, but it gives us an awareness of the person as a whole, which is the basis for all our understanding of the other.

The starting point and end point of all reasoning about the other, Simmel declares, should be the "thou" (161). The "thou" is a primal phenomenon of the human mind, like seeing and hearing, like thinking and feeling. We cannot reduce our experience of it to something more basic because it is the basis of all experience. Rather than resting on inferences about our experience, it is the transcendental condition of any experience (162). The "thou" is a category like no other; it is as important for the practical and historical world as the categories of substance and causality are for the natural world. I cannot call the "thou" my representation like I call any other object my representation. The "thou" is my single pair in the cosmos, the only being that I understand reciprocally and feel one with like nothing else. The "thou" has independence and sovereignty alongside me; it has the same claim to absolute reality as my own soul (162). It is a mistake to think that, because the idea of the "thou" appears later and more obscurely and imperfectly in our early experience, it is not simple and primary (162). In his comments about the "thou", it is possible to see an anticipation of Martin Buber's later interpersonal philosophy.[15]

15 The extensive correspondence between Simmel and Buber, which began in 1904 and continued until at least 1916, gives no indication how Simmel might have influenced Buber's philosophy. See their correspondence in GSG XXII–XXIII. In Bernhard Lang's edition of *Ich und Du*, there are several passages that are considered implicit references to Simmel. See Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983), sections 36.1, 43, 50.2.

6

THE PHILOSOPHY OF MONEY

6.1 Aims and Methods of a *Magnum Opus*

In December 1900 Simmel finally published what many regard as his *magnum opus*, *Philosophie des Geldes*.[1] It was the culmination of many years of work, beginning in 1889 and lasting throughout the 1890s. The size of the work matched Simmel's ambitions: it was over 700 pages. The work was more than a compilation of earlier articles; most of it, more than 400 pages, was new.

Simmel did not always call his book philosophical. His first writing on the topic refers to a "psychology of money".[2] He first conceived it as a philosophy of money in 1897 when he published two articles whose titles bore the phrase "*Philosophie des Geldes*".[3] The shift from psychology to philosophy was significant because it greatly expanded Simmel's conception of his project, which he now conceived as "a philosophy of the whole of historical and social life".[4] Money would have to be understood not only from the perspective of psychology but also from that of history and society.

1 Georg Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes* (Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1900). A second edition appeared in 1907. All references here are to the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*, volume VI, which is based on the second edition.

2 "Zur Psychologie des Geldes", *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich* 13 (1889), 1251–1264.

3 "Die Rolle des Geldes in den Beziehungen der Geschlechter. Fragment aus einer Philosophie des Geldes", *Die Zeit*, Band 14 (1898) 38–40, 53–54, 69–71. "Fragment aus einer Philosophie des Geldes", *Zeitschrift für immanente Philosophie*, III (1898), 395–428.

4 See Simmel to Bouglé, December 13, 1899, GSG XXII, 343.

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Why the interest in money? Why was it so important? In his 1890 *Über sociale Differenzierung*, Simmel conceived of society under the concept of "the interaction of its parts"[5] (*die Wechselwirkung der Teile*), which was his middle path between the extremes of Platonism, which hypostasized society, and atomism, which reduced society down to the sum of individuals. Interaction recognized that people became who they were through their life with others (against atomism) yet it did not hypostasize an entity beyond its members (against Platonism). In the *Philosophie des Geldes*, Simmel came to much greater clarity about what was involved in interaction. He realized that much interaction consisted in exchange (*Tausch*), which, though not the only form of interaction, was still its purest and most intense.[6] Every interaction—"every conversation, every love, every game, every look at one another"—should be conceived as a form of exchange. But if interaction consists in exchange, then money becomes of central importance because it is what usually motivates exchange. Money was not behind all forms of exchange, of course, but it was behind its most basic forms. An understanding of money was therefore crucial to understanding society itself. Simmel thinks that we can define the distinguishing feature of human kind as the exchanging animal (*das tauschende Tier*) (385).

What is the method of the *Philosophie des Geldes*? How did Simmel intend to interpret the phenomenon? Simmel's most explicit answer to this question comes in the preface to his book. Simmel is emphatic in rejecting any conflation of his work with traditional economics. "No lines of this investigation is intended to be national-economic", he writes (11). What Simmel means by this is that he will not explain economic terms—value, exchange, production and investment—by other economic terms, as if economics were a self-sufficient discipline. Economics is only one discipline within the academic division of labor, and as such it cannot exhaust the full meaning of a phenomenon. Just as the founder of a religion cannot be understood solely in religious terms but also should be understood according to psychology, history and sociology, so when two people exchange goods their actions should be understood not only according to economics but also according to psychology, history and sociology. A purely economic fact, one exhaustible only in economic terms, simply does not exist. As Simmel implies here: his approach to the topic of money will be holistic and interdisciplinary; he will understand it from the perspectives of psychology, history, biology and aesthetics. He was true to his word: what is remarkable about the *Philosophie des Geldes* is just how many perspectives it brings to bear upon the topic of money.

5 *Über sociale Differenzierung*, GSG II, 129–130.
6 See *Philosophie des Geldes*, GSG VI, 59–60.

In his preface Simmel explains that his philosophy of money consists in two parts. One part is analytic, which comprises chapters I to III; the other part is synthetic, which consists in chapters IV to VI (10–11). The analytic part will investigate the presuppositions that give money its meaning and practical place in the world; it will treat money from those conditions that constitute "its essence and the meaning of its existence" (*sein Wesen und den Sinn seines Daseins*). The synthetic part will consider the effects of money on the "inner world", how it affects the psychology, the feeling of individuals and culture in general. In other words, the analytic part will consider the "essence of money" according to "the conditions and relations of life in general", while the synthetic part will consider the effects of money on life in general; money will then be both explanandum and explanans.

Simmel especially emphasizes the holistic aspect of his interpretation of money. Thus he writes: "The meaning and purpose of the whole is only this: to draw a line from the superficies of economic events to the ultimate values and meaning of the human" (12). The unity of his work does not lie in its concentration upon a single significant phenomenon, viz., money, but in showing how every detail of life has its meaning only in the whole. In other words, Simmel's method is *hermeneutical*, an instance of the method outlined by Dilthey and Droysen, which explains the whole through its parts and its parts through the whole. This is the opposite of the mechanical method advocated by Spencer, Mill and Lamprecht.

The *Philosophie des Geldes* was not least a polemical work, a critique of competing economic theories. It was a critique of Marxist theories on the left as well as romantic or conservative theories on the right. Against the Marxists, Simmel criticized the view that the base and driving forces of society were the forces of production, of which social relations and ideology were only the superstructure (13). He could accept no theory that was one-sided, that laid emphasis upon one factor of the social whole as the sole factor behind its structure. The economy was as much a result of culture as it was a basis for culture. He also questioned the Marxist view of money as a source of the alienation and domination in the modern economy. Money was for Simmel more the foundation for the liberation of the individual from all forms of historical constraint. Against the romantics and conservatives, Simmel stressed how the modern market economy, though it destroyed the communal bonds of the past, was also the source of freedom and individuality. Though critical of the romantics, Simmel was never an absolute champion of modern civil society: he deplored its vast inequalities in wealth; and he regretted its destruction of the old bonds of community. Like the social democrats,[7]

7 On Simmel's relation with the social democrats, see Ralph M. Leck, *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology* (New York: Prometheus Books: 2000), pp. 51–54, 69–74.

he believed that the powerful forces of modern production would have to be controlled and managed by the state for the benefit of the whole German people.

One of the persistent myths about Simmel's *Philosophie des Geldes* is that it is unhistorical, that it fails to provide "a systematic historical analysis" of the world of money.[8] This criticism is both unfair and inaccurate. Seldom does Simmel *not* provide a broad historical perspective about the development of the money economy and how it grew out of and departed from the medieval period. His perspective is unflaggingly broad, comparing the modern West with other cultures and epochs. This is exactly what we should expect of Simmel, who was a convinced historicist and who always emphasized historical change. This myth derives from Marxists who do not find their specific conclusions parroted by Simmel.

Simmel's work is best approached through the early articles that preceded it. They reveal some of Simmel's central themes very clearly, which are lost sight of in the mass of material in the work itself. We will here focus upon just two of those articles.

6.2 The Psychology of Money

Simmel's first writing on the topic of money was his "Zur Psychologie des Geldes", which first appeared in 1889,[9] a full ten years before *Philosophie des Geldes*. We know that Simmel gave a lecture on just this topic on May 20, 1889, for Gustav Schmoller's political science seminar.[10] Simmel's interest in the topic persisted in the 1890s. We also know from his June 22, 1895, letter to Célestin Bouglé that he was still working on a topic he called "Psychologie des Geldes", which he hoped to finish in the next year.[11] He told Bouglé on December 26, 1895, that he already had plans to expand this article into "a greater work".[12] This greater work was probably what later became known as *Philosophie des Geldes*.

Given the importance of "Zur Psychologie des Geldes", we do well to investigate the article closely. Its themes anticipate much of what Simmel will have to say in his *Philosophie des Geldes*. This article is a large part of the embryo of the later work.

8 See David Frisby, *Gerog Simmel* (London, Tavistock, 1984), p. 58.

9 "Zur Psychologie des Geldes", *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich* Jahrgang 13, Heft 3, (1889), 1251–1264.

10 See Gustav Schmoller, "Simmels Philosophie des Geldes", *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft im Deutschen Reich*, Band 25 (1901), 799–816, p. 799.

11 See GSG XXII, 150.

12 See GSG, XXII, 164.

In the beginning of his article, Simmel explains the origin of money by placing it in the context of the most basic human actions: finding means to achieve ends (49–50). To reach our ends, no matter what they are, we have to find the appropriate means; these are causes whose effects will be the realization of our ends. Sometimes, to achieve our ends, we will have to go through a long series of causes; at other times, the series will be very short, so that we reach our end almost immediately. The series of causes, necessary or sufficient, to attain our ends Simmel calls the "teleological process" or "teleological chain". "The progress of culture", Simmel says, is characterized by the formation and growth of these means-ends chains or "teleological processes", whereby we obtain indirectly what we could not get directly (50).

All human economic activity, Simmel informs us, consists in these means-ends chains. This activity takes place specifically in exchange, which basically consists in the formation of means for ends. If A wants the object X which B owns, A must give B something of equivalent value to X; B will not part with X unless he gets something of equal value to it. Hence the most effective way of achieving the ends of A and B is through some middle term Z, whose value is accepted by both A and B. This middle term is money, which is the means of exchange between A and B. Thus money is the means of achieving ends for the purposes of exchange (50–51).

So far Simmel has characterized the creation of money as a completely rational process. It is a straightforward means of achieving ends. One measure of rational conduct is choosing means effective for the achievement of ends; if the means is necessary or sufficient for the attainment of an end, then the choice of it is rational. But Simmel notes one of the "the most remarkable properties of the human mind" which is apparently not rational at all: that the means for an action often becomes an end in itself (51). This happens when a means is foremost in our consciousness or when the ends lie far off in the future. The value of the means, which originally derived from the end, becomes detached from and independent of the end. This process is especially conspicuous in the case of a miser; but Simmel thinks that it appears in all kinds of activities. For example, a scholar investigates the most trivial detail of an epoch forgetting that his real aim is the knowledge of the culture as a whole; or technicians perfect mechanisms forgetting what their purpose should be (52).

No sooner has Simmel introduced "this remarkable characteristic of the human mind"—i.e., treating means for ends as if they were ends themselves—than he makes a very remarkable statement about it: that this is "one of the most purposive arrangements of the mental organism" (52). The most irrational or counterpurposive activity of the human mind then turns out to be rational or purposive after all! Why is this? Simmel explains that we cannot have always before our minds the whole series of means and ends. To have the necessary mental energy and concentration to achieve the means,

we must push its purpose to the back of our minds and treat the means as if it were the end itself. It seems as if we do not have sufficient energy or concentration to focus on the end while we are striving to get the means. Simmel suggests that this is due to the principle of conservation of energy, which demands that, to have sufficient energy to get the means, we must focus on it alone (52).

"In the whole web of human purposive conduct", Simmel writes, there is no middle term in which this "psychological trait of the growth of means to ends" is more conspicuous than in the case of money (52). In other words, we often value money for more than what we can buy with it. The possession of money has become an end in itself, independent of anything that it can buy. Simmel outlines these stages of the teleological process: first, the rational purpose, which is the enjoyment in the use of the object; then, second, the means for this: 1) that one has money; 2) that one spends it for the object; 3) that one owns the objects. On each of these stages, purposive activity can stop and make the stage an end in itself (53).

Simmel notes some of the psychological consequences of these stages. Some people spend their whole life chasing after money only to fall into despair when they realize that acquiring it cannot be the end of life (53). Others, however, like misers, cling to the value of money alone; they thereby avoid all the disappointments that come from spending money; their pleasures are like those of the aesthete who takes pleasure in the mere forms of things (54). The decadent becomes blasé because he or she thinks that the value of anything simply depends on the money that one is willing to pay for it.

Simmel raises the question, which will preoccupy him in the first chapter of *Philosophie des Geldes*, whether money is a value in itself or only a symbol of value (55). Originally, money must have been something of value in itself, viz., certain commodities or precious metals, because no one would accept payment for a good without a guarantee of its value (54). The better the official guarantees, the less the intrinsic value of the money itself. Regardless of these guarantees, it seems that money still must have some intrinsic value because it is a measure of value; what is a measure of value must have the characteristics of what it measures; thus a measure of length must have a length, a measure of weight must have a weight; hence money, as a measure of value, must have a value; it cannot be merely a fiction, a mere sign for value (55).

Simmel thinks that this whole controversy—whether money is a value in itself or only a symbol of value—shows "an astounding neglect of deciding psychological moments" (55). The opponents of symbolic money forget that the values, for which money is to serve as a symbol, are only *psychological*; there are no objective values in the absolute sense but something has a value only through the will of a human being who desires it. The value does not adhere to the object anymore than the pleasure of a ray of sun inheres in the ray. Nothing is of value in itself—neither shelter, clothing or a metal—but

it becomes valuable only because someone values it (56), Simmel stresses. Those who do not want to accept the value of money, even when its exchange value is generally recognized, are like those idealists who say something is good only if it fulfills *true* needs. It is necessary to realize, Simmel insists, that all value is a psychological fact and nothing more (56). The general theory of value that Simmel expounds here will reappear later in chapter I of the *Philosophie des Geldes*.

After introducing his general theory of the value of money, Simmel begins to discuss the social and psychological consequences of the dominance of money in the modern economy. The fact that money is only a quantity, that it has no quality, makes it entirely impersonal. It does not matter who is paying for something; one person's money is as good as another's (60). As Simmel puts it: "Money is the absolute objective, in which all personality ends" (60). Because money has the power to buy almost anything, it seems that anything can be bought if only one is willing to pay the price. It appears that things have value only because of their price (61). As a result, even the objects one buys with money become characterless; it is not their specific qualities that matter but only their price. In the money economy the central question is not *what* a thing is worth but *how much* it is worth (57).

Simmel notes that there are some apparent exceptions to the power of money in modern society (62). Unlike the Middle Ages, one can no longer offer money to pay for the worst crimes; one can no longer replace fasting and repentance with money. Yet Simmel insists that these exceptions prove the rule. Precisely because money could pay for everything else, it ceased to be adequate recompense for certain exceptional and special values. They could prove their worth only as exceptions to the almost universal exchange of value in money.

Simmel thinks that we can make serious sense of the common saying that money is the god of the age. There are significant analogies between the idea of god and the concept of money. The idea of god is that of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, that unity of the world in which all opposites are reconciled, that point of peace and harmony where all strife ceases. Money too is like "the resting pole in the flow of the economic appearances", a stable point amid all the changing individual phenomena (64). The *tertium comparationis* between god and money is the feeling of rest and security: it is what the pious finds in god and what the avaricious finds in his heap of gold (65).

6.3 Money in Modern Culture

Of all Simmel's early articles leading to *Die Philosophie des Geldes* the most explanatory and illuminating for his later work is his "Das Geld in der modernen Cultur", which he published in 1896 in the *Zeitschrift des*

Oberschlesischen Berg- und Hüttenmännischen Vereins.[13] Such an obscure journal was the site of some major conceptual undertakings. In this article Simmel reveals himself as the champion of the new monetary economy. Here he puts forward his case, later much amplified in *Die Philosophie des Geldes*, for modernism against the conservatives and romantics, who saw that money economy as a threat to freedom and community.

To put the modern economy in perspective, Simmel began his article with a fundamental contrast between the modern and the medieval (178). In the Middle Ages, he wrote, a person had close personal bonds with his province, community or corporation; his personality was fused with their interests and his concerns were inseparable from them. The modern age severed these bonds. It made the individual stand alone, and it gave him a freedom of movement apart from province, community or corporation. But, at the same time, it gave social forms—technology, businesses, vocations and organizations of all kinds—an objectivity free from the influence of the individual, so that they seemed to follow their own ends and norms. This "objectivity" of social forms was like that in the natural sciences as nature became deprived of its human features and obeyed its own laws. This separated subject and object, human being and nature, so that each followed its own distinctive laws.

What separated the medieval individual from his world, Simmel claims, was the introduction of the money economy. It placed between the individual and his world the power and authority of money (179). It created a distance between the individual and his locale and possessions, such that a person could now derive his income from "American railroads, Norwegian mortgages and African goldmines". In this way money created complete impersonality of all economic transactions and an increased independence of the owner. Just as the individual was separated from his locale and property, so he was separated from his community (180). In the Middle Ages, the whole personality belonged to the medieval guild, which was not only a business but a complete community in a social, religious and political sense. Modern associations, in contrast, are organized only according to their economic interests or financial concerns. The individual no longer belongs to the group through his whole character but only through his economic contributions. Money is now placed between the association and individual, so that each of them has their independence. The epitome of this development is the modern stock company, whose business concerns only the money of the investor and has nothing to do with his character.

It would seem that the growth of the money economy, as Simmel has described it, has been a force for evil because it has loosened the bonds of

13 "Das Geld in der modernen Cultur", *Zeitschrift des Oberschlesischen Berg- und Hüttenmännischen Vereins*, 35 (1896), 319–324. (Vortrag, gehalten in der Gesellschaft österreichischer Volkswirthe, mitgetheilt nach der *Neuen Freien Presse*, Wien). GSG V, 178–196.

community, giving the individual little sense of belonging in his world. This, at least, is how some of the romantics saw the growth of the money economy. But no sooner does Simmel paint these negative consequences of the money economy than he stresses their positive side. It is precisely through the "characterlessness" of money—its value independent of the particular owner—that it has done for culture "an immeasurable service", he says (180). This service allows individuals to form associations whose activities and contributions are independent of the identities and personalities of their members. Simmel gives two examples of these associations (181). One is the syndicates of workers-unions in France. These syndicates were formed from the financial contributions of their members, so that they could undertake large payments impossible for the individual alone. Because their primary goal was economic, the syndicates managed to retain their independence from the larger union. The other is the Gustav-Adolphus Union in Germany to aid hard-pressed evangelical communities. The mere fact that this association worked through financial contributions alone, whereby the donor was held anonymous, allowed it to overcome sectarian divisions and aid a common cause. These associations showed the possibility of achieving common ends through money alone, leaving the individual free from the needs and obligations of larger groups. Though we now take such a possibility for granted, Simmel says that it is among "the momentous shifts and progress of culture" (181).

Simmel stresses other advantages and strengths of the modern economy (181–182). If one complains about the separating and alienating effect of the money economy, one should not forget, he argues, that it also creates connections among a wide variety of people. Precisely because money cannot be used immediately, it will not spoil like a commodity payment and many individuals could eventually give or receive it in payment. The modern individual could therefore connect with many more creditors than the old Germanic serf or bondsman.

The most important development of the money economy was the modern division of labor (182). Through natural exchange in goods and services alone, the economy could not develop beyond the most scanty of beginnings. It is only money that widened exchange by providing a common measure of value of different products. Money allowed each individual to devote himself to a specific task, and so encouraged the possibility of a division of labor. There was much more social unity through the division of labor because all were working for a common goal rather for themselves alone. In this way money has created "incomparably greater connection among human beings" than what was possible in the "famous age of the feudal bonds praised by the association romantics" (183).[14]

14 Simmel refers to the "*Associations-Romantikern*", one of his few references to the romantics, though he does not name any specific figure.

The money economy gave a person a greater sense of individuality and independence than in the past when each person lived in a smaller community (183). Then there were fewer people with whom the individual came into contact (his family, church and neighbors) and he had close relationships with them; but now, with the growth of the economy, he knew many more people and could choose which were his friends. With the growth of economic opportunities the individual now had greater freedom in the choice of his occupation. The money economy also created the very modern idea and practice that traditional obligations could be paid off with money, thus freeing the individual to do whatever else he wanted (184). Through a money payment, the individual no longer had to surrender his interests or freedom but something completely separate from himself (185).

The money economy has created a common interest for people in ways that the old natural economy never could. It has established a basis for understanding among very different people and given them all a similar direction in life. This has produced the idea of the *universality of man* (*jene Vorstellung des Allgemein-Menschlichen*), which played such an enormous role during the French Revolution (183).

No sooner had Simmel finished defending the money economy than he began to note some of its problems. His defense could be plausible only if it were also balanced, noting the problems as well as the merits of the money economy. If the money economy had to be defended, it also could not be whitewashed. And so Simmel notes one of the major problems in paying off obligations with money: these obligations often had liberties and privileges connected with them which disappeared as soon as one sold them (185–186). The serf who sold his land to pay off his obligations found that he had nothing to cultivate, that he had lost his livelihood, what gave his life meaning and purpose. The problem with a culture centered around money, Simmel argues, is that people think that money buys everything. "Here lies", he intoned, "the ground for the problematic character, for the unrest and dissatisfaction of our times" (186). The belief in the omnipotence of money has led to a neglect of all those values that cannot be bought and sold, so that "the core and sense of life once again slides out of our hands".

Simmel lamented the general consequences of money culture. Money had devalued everything that once had a higher value and meaning (187). Because it is the equivalent for everything, money is "common". What is equal to many, is equal to the lowest of the many, and therefore it drags the highest down to the level of the lowest. The tragedy of leveling is that it tends toward the standpoint of the lowest elements.

The fact that money can buy so many things that were once unattainable in the past has led many people to believe that happiness is now within their reach (190). If only they earn so much money, they believe, they will have achieved all that life promises them. The apparent closeness of their

happiness has fed their fantasies and feelings to a fever pitch. Hence the restlessness, inquietude and desperation of modern life, all of which comes from money, which is the *Perpetuum mobile* behind it all.

In all his complaints and laments about money culture, Simmel expressed his agreement, if only implicitly, with the romantic critique of modernism. The problem with that critique was not that it was false but that it was one-sided; because it could see nothing good in the money economy, it wanted to go back to the past, to the Middle Ages; but for Simmel that was unwise and impossible: it was to forfeit all the great advantages and progress of the modern world.

One of the deeper characteristics of our time, Simmel concludes his article, is the knowledge that everything in culture—religion, philosophy, art, science—is the product of historical development, that there is nothing permanent and eternal but everything is the result of change and evolution (194). Simmel assures us that money too is subject to the general historical flux of culture, and that it does not stand apart from it. Historical materialism teaches us that all cultural change comes from the economy; but the consideration of money shows that money too is caught up in the general movement of cultural change, that it too is only "one branch of the same root" (195). From that, one can have some consolation against all those who complain about the *Auri sacra fames*:[15] one sees that the mystical spear that makes the wound will also help to heal it (196). It would be the business of *Die Philosophie des Geldes* to uncover this root, and so to help heal the wounds of modernity.

6.4 Commentary

The following commentary on the *Philosophie des Geldes* is based upon volume 6 of the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1989), edited by David Frisby and Klaus Köhnke. This edition follows the second expanded edition, which appeared in 1907 with Duncker & Humblot Verlag, Leipzig.

The *Philosophie des Geldes* is divided into six chapters, where each chapter is subdivided into three sections. Only the chapters have titles; the sections are designated, like the original, only with a Roman numeral. The commentary follows this organization. All numbers in parentheses refer to the page numbers of volume 6 of the *Gesamtausgabe*.

15 The cursed greed for gold. From Virgil *Aeneid*, iii, 57.

6.5 Chapter One: Value and Money

I.

The first section of the first chapter of *Philosophie des Geldes* concerns the nature of value (*Wert*).[16] What is value? All money represents value; and only if we know what it represents can we understand it. But the nature of value, it turns out, is more complicated than it first appears. Simmel investigated this tricky topic in the first chapter of his *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*; here he reaffirms his voluntarism.

As in his earlier work, Simmel begins with a basic distinction between value and fact. The value of things, he tells us, is distinct from the nature of things (23). The world of value is "a completely autonomous order" apart from the world of facts (25). The relation between value and fact is purely contingent; it is possible for a value to be a fact, when, for example, an ideal becomes realized, or an obligation is acted upon; but it is also possible for a value not to be a fact, for an ideal not to be realized, or an obligation not to be acted upon (24). This distinction means that if I regard a thing as a value, it gains no new property (25). Value is not a property of a thing, like its color or size.

Beside value and fact, another basic concept for Simmel is content (*Inhalt*). Very simply, content is *what* a thing is (28). There are two kinds of questions about content. We can ask of any content: 1) whether it exists and 2) whether it is valuable (26). The existence and value of the content are independent of the content itself; in other words, the same content might exist or not exist; and the same content might be valuable or not valuable. We can demonstrate that something exists only through some other thing that we know to exist; and we can demonstrate that something is valuable only through some other thing that we know to be valuable. But, in themselves, apart from other things, existence and value are indemonstrable; they are primary or original phenomena (*Urphänomena*) (27).

The human mind has the remarkable capacity, Simmel writes, to think of content independent of its being thought (32).[17] In other words, it can

16 On Simmel's theory of value, see also Guido Kreis, "Die Ordnung der Dinge: Wirklichkeit und Wert" and Christian Papilloud, "Die Gesellschaft: Tausch und Objektivation der Werte", in *Georg Simmel: Philosophie des Geldes*, eds. Gerald Hartung und Tim-Florian Steinbach (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), pp. 19–41, 41–56.

17 Literally, the sentence is self-contradictory: if the content is thought or conceived, then it cannot be independent of its being thought or conceived, because the very act of thinking or conceiving it makes it thought or conceived. The German sentence does not evade this contradiction: "*Unser Geist hat die merkwürdige Fähigkeit, Inhalte als von ihrem Gedachtwerden unabhängig zu denken…*" (32). Formulated less paradoxically, Simmel's point is simple: that the essence of the content, what it is, does not depend on our thinking of it.

conceive of content having its properties and connections independent of whether it thinks of them (32). The properties and connections of the content still hold even if we do *not* think of them. As Simmel paradoxically puts it: "…the content of representing does not coincide with the representing of the content" (32).

Just as the content remains the same whether we think of it or not, something is valuable whether or not it is recognized (36). The content of a value exists in an ideal realm independent of both subject and object, i.e., independent of the subject who thinks of it and its existence itself.

A value (*ein Wert*) is an object of desire characterized by a distance from the subject who desires it (34). There must be some distance from the object for it to have a value; in other words, there must be something that prevents the subject from having and consuming the object. For once an object is possessed or consumed, it ceases to be a value for the subject. Value requires, in other words, that there still be some opposition between subject and object; the object must *not* be obtained or consumed by the subject. Valuable things are not difficult to obtain because they are valuable; but they are valuable because they are difficult to obtain (35).

Simmel contends that, in the distance between the subject and object, there must be a threshold of obtainability (43). The distance must not be so great that the subject cannot obtain it; and it must not be so small that obtaining it requires no effort at all. There must be a higher and lower limit of obtainability.

Values seem subjective because one and the same object can be valued highly or lowly depending on the subject (28). But to say value is "subjective" normally only means something negative: that value is not a property of an object like its temperature or color (29). Simmel has already committed himself to the objectivity of value in the sense that something can be valuable whether or not it is recognized as valuable (35–36). This is again part of that remarkable capacity of the human mind: to represent something as having truth or validity regardless of our capacity to represent it.

The whole question of the subjectivity or objectivity of value is misplaced, Simmel argues (50). We put content in the spectrum of being and value as if this were the same as objectivity and subjectivity. But value belongs in a completely different order of things, one that puts it outside the whole question of subjectivity or objectivity, i.e., whether something exists only as thought or whether it exists independent of thought.[18] In exchange, the whole question is whether two values are equivalent or not, which is independent of whether they are thought or not; in exchange, value becomes "supersubjective" (*übersubjektiv*) and "superindividual" (*überindividuell*) (53).

18 Here Simmel shows a great debt to Lotze's theory of value. See Hermann Lotze, *System der Philosophie: Erster Theil: Drei Bücher der Logik* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1874), I 465–497.

II.

In section II of chapter 1, Simmel introduces the topic of exchange.

What is fundamental to the economy is exchange. In exchange, the quantity of one object corresponds to the quantity of another object; the proportion between them is something objectively measurable and, as it were, lawful (55). The economy drives its power less from the values it exchanges than from exchange itself (57). What counts is the *equality* of the exchange; in this respect, the economy is like geometry, which concerns the relations between things rather than the things themselves (57). The economy leads the stream of evaluations through the form of exchange, which is a middle realm between *desires*, from which all motion in the human world begins, and their *satisfaction*, in which these motions end (57).

We abstract from reality those particular aspects or facts that interest us (58). We have no relation to reality as such or in general except through vague feelings (58). The economic system is based on an abstraction like all other systems; it is concerned with the reciprocity of exchange, with loss and profit. What is decisive for the objectivity of the economic system is that it has a validity beyond the individual subject (58–59).

That one object is given for another shows that an object is of value not only for myself but that it is so in itself. The economic form of values is based on the equation: objectivity=validity for the subject in general (59). Every element in an exchange might be of personal or subjective value; but that two elements are *equal* in value is something objective about them; this equality is not in the elements alone but nor is it beyond them; it exists in the *relations* between them (59).

The majority of relations between human beings can be considered exchange (59). Exchange is the purest and most intense interaction in human life. Many actions appear completely one-sided; but they in fact involve a form of interaction. So one has the dictum: "I am your leader; so I must follow you" (59). Every interaction can be considered a form of exchange (viz., entertainment, discussions, love, games, looking at one another). In exchange each party should be able to say that "the sum of values is greater afterwards than previously" (60).

There is an objection against the view that economic value is the same as exchange (61). An isolated landlord, who does not buy or sell anything, must still estimate the value of his products; but he does so independent of all exchange with another. Simmel contends that this objection proves exactly what it wants to refute. The deliberations of the landlord, which reckon the value of his products by the labor invested in them or the expense someone pays for them, are still a form of exchange. It does not matter that the exchange is only imaginary; there is the same basic reasoning regarding what one gives and receives. Simmel goes so far as to say: "The exchange within

the individual is the fundamental presupposition and, as it were, the essential substance of all two-sided exchange" (62). The natural and "solipsistic exchange" is founded on the same basic form as the two-sided exchange: on the balance between giving and receiving.

We cannot take a single step, and we cannot have a single thought, without our feelings giving values to things and without directing these things through our actions (63). But our actions take place according to the schema of exchange; from the lowest needs to the acquisition of the highest intellectual and religious goods, we must invest a value to gain a value.

If there were no effort or sacrifice involved in obtaining goods—if they were free simply for our asking—then they would not have an economic value (71). Something acquires economic value only through exchange, only if I give up something to obtain something else. But the condition of exchange is my belief that what I will receive will be of greater value to me that what I give. The measure of the value of what I will give up in exchange is price (78). Price can be more than just the amount of money I pay; it can be the patience of waiting, the expenditure or labor, the renunciation of other desirable things (78).

Two basic aspects of economic worth are utility and scarcity (74). They correspond to what economists have traditionally conceived as demand and supply. But these concepts are not exactly equivalent. Utility is the condition of demand: if an object has no use, there would be no demand for it. Utility is based on the desirability (*Bekehrtheit*) of an object (75). Without desirability, utility is no motive for economic activity. It is a mistake of many economic theorists that they think that economic value follows from utility and scarcity alone (84). If utility and scarcity are accompanied by an ascetic ethic, or if they give rise to conflict and theft, there is no economic value (84).

III.

The first half of section III is a disquisition on the fundamental principles of epistemology. It is not obvious why Simmel introduces this topic here. He explains himself in the first paragraph by saying that before introducing the topic of money, he needs to place it in a definite view of the world to measure "the philosophical meaning of money" (93). In section III, Simmel expounds his infamous relativism.[19]

19 On Simmel's relativism, see Johannes Steizinger, "Georg Simmels Bekenntnis zum Relativismus" in *Der Philosoph Georg Simmel*, eds. Gerald Hartung, Heike Koenig, Tim Florian Steinbach (Freiburg: Karl Alber Verlag, 2020), pp. 111–140; Matthieu Amat, "Relativism: a theoretical and practical philosophical programme", in *The Routledge International Handbook of Simmel Studies*, ed. Gregor Fitzi (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 93–110; and Martin Kusch, "Die Verteidigung des Relativismus" in *Simmel: Philosophie des Geldes*, pp. 57–80.

It is a basic tendency of modern science, Simmel tells us, that it understands phenomena not as substances but as motions, and that it understands the qualities of things through quantities (95). Rather than treating the independent essence of things, it concerns itself only with their motions and relations. An example of this is that the earth is seen not in rest but in motion, and that its place in the cosmos consists in its interchange with other material masses.

It becomes clear in the first half of section III that Simmel thinks that this basic tendency of modern science is also evident in epistemology, that here too there is no absolute standpoint: that everything is in motion and in relation with something else. Simmel then applies this epistemological lesson to money. Money was once thought of as an absolute, as having its value in itself, as a permanent substance apart from the phenomena; but now we shall see that it is comprehensible only as a motion, as having its meaning only in and through its relations with phenomena.

Simmel explains the absolutist view of money and exchange only at the end of section III. He calls this "the substantial-absolutistic view of the world" (132). In the medieval world value was something objective. Things had their value in themselves, and there was a right and natural exchange value for things which depended on the things themselves.

Simmel illustrates his relativistic epistemology through a discussion of the conditions of truth. To determine truth, we need a criterion of knowledge that is general and certain (96). This criterion must have an ultimate ground which requires no justification itself. The problem is that we cannot *know* what this ultimate ground is (96). The process of searching for higher grounds never reaches an end. We have to treat every point that *appears* final *as if* it were only final; we have to assume that it is really, for all we know, the one *before* the last.

A similar problem arises in geometry (99). All proofs require axioms; but axioms themselves do not have the dignity of having been proven. We can stop with axioms only as long as we cannot go higher in the search for proofs; but we never know when we cannot go higher; and we must always search for the grounds of axioms in higher ones.

A similar problem also occurs in natural science. We assume that all natural events conform to laws; but we have difficulty in knowing these laws (97). The content of the laws we propose are always historically conditioned and relative. There is no law that can make a claim to eternal validity; all have validity only for the conditions and circumstances in which we have found them (97).

The relativity of knowledge is especially apparent, Simmel argues, from the fact that representation is a function of our physical and psychic organization (100). This organization determines the content of our knowledge; and the content therefore differs with each specific form of physical and psychic

organization. No species can therefore claim to represent the world in itself through its specific content, through what it perceives. But it is still the case, Simmel notes, that each kind of organism is successful in its dealing with the world; they all seem to act in ways which adapt to the world and ensure their survival. What this shows, Simmel argues, is that truth depends not on the content of representations—on their resembling reality in itself—but in success in acting on the representations (102). Truth therefore means not accurate representation—in the sense of copying content—but successful action. We have no more definitive a criterion of truth than this: acting according to a representation results in the desired consequences (103).

Relativism with respect to the principles of knowledge means, Simmel explains, that constitutive principles that make claims about the existence of things should be formulable into regulative ones which are viewpoints for the progress of knowledge (106). Rather than assuming that we have knowledge of things, we must proceed *as if* things were so. This heuristic way of proceeding allows for the validity of opposed standpoints, which stimulate and complement our own standpoint (107). Rather than having two opposing metaphysical systems, one monistic and the other pluralistic, one adopts both monistic and pluralistic axioms which complement one another. The monistic principle tells us, in its regulative reading, to unify every plurality as far as possible; the pluralistic principle enjoins us, in its regulative reading, to analyze every unity into its separate elements as far as possible (108).

The major fault of all epistemological principles is that they must submit to the same strictures that they impose on all other claims to knowledge (116). Dogmatism bases all knowledge on a criterion; but then it needs a criterion to justify the criterion. Skepticism claims that all knowledge is impossible, which means that such a claim should be impossible. If all knowledge claims are deceptive, so are those of skepticism itself (117). Relativism, however, does not exempt itself from its own claims; but it is not destroyed because they too are relative (117). Relativism pushes the question about the justification of its own principles, which it moves on to infinity. Relativism acknowledges that every judgment that we make requires a higher judgment; but it also recognizes that this higher judgment itself requires yet another higher judgment, and so on *ad infinitum* (118). In making itself subject to its own claims, relativism expresses what is essential to the thinking spirit: the right to judge itself (119).

Having completed his exposition of his epistemological principles, Simmel proceeds to discuss his main subject: money. Money, he writes, is the purest expression and climax of the economic interdependence of things (122). "*Geld*", Simmel says reminding us of its etymology, is "*das Geltende*", the validating, where economic validity means something is exchangeable for something else (124). Money is the expression of the capacity of exchange; and it is the conceptual existence and symbol of the exchangeability of objects (122).

Money is a norm of the relative value of things (124). These norms are not relative in the same sense as the things they regulate. Nevertheless, Simmel sees that the value of money itself fluctuates and is not always constant. In fact, money performs a double role: it measures the values of exchangeable goods amongst one another; but it also enters into the exchanges and becomes a measurable quantity itself (126). So Simmel writes: "Money belongs to those normative representations that bend to the norm that they are themselves" (122).

6.6 Chapter Two: Substance Value of Money

I.

The discussion about the essence of money so far has raised the question whether money, to provide its service as a measure of value, is a value itself, or whether it suffices for it to be mere sign or symbol without having any value itself (139). The question of the substance value of money is whether it has a value in itself or whether it only represents things of value, such as gold or silver.[20]

The question seems to resolve itself according to the principle: that the means of measurement must have the same quality as the thing measured, viz., a measure for length must have a length, a measure for weight must have a weight, a measure for space must be in space. Hence a measure for value must have value itself. Although two things might be very unalike in all other qualities, they must be alike in the respect in which they are compared or measured. A blow of the wind and a human hand are very unalike; but both break the branch of a tree; so they are alike in their having a common force or energy. So money and everything it measures might be very unalike; but they are alike in having value (140).

But against this principle, Simmel proposes that we consider the following (141). Two very unalike objects, the most unalike imaginable, viz., material movements and mental events, which have no points wherein they are alike. Nevertheless, the physiologist (*Psychophysiker*) can measure from changes in external movements, which are stimuli for our sense organs, the relative strength of changes in conscious sensation. There is a *constant relationship* between the quantity of one factor (changes in movements) and the quantity of the other (strength of changes in sensation), even though there is no *qualitative* property they have in common. When we are comparing the quantities of different *things* they must indeed have a common quality; but when we

20 On Simmel's argument in chapter 2, see Ralf Becker, "Die neue Logik: von der Substanz zur Funktion", in *Simmel: Philosophie des Geldes*, pp. 81–98.

are comparing *relations* or *proportions* between things, there is no need for them to have a common quality at all. All that we are comparing is not the qualities of the things themselves but only their relations or proportions to other things. Hence, on this principle, money need not be a value to measure the values between things anymore than a symbol has to have a qualitative likeness with what it symbolizes. All that it needs to measure is the *ratios* between things.

No sooner does Simmel develop the details of his argument than he warns us about its limits. His argument does not really touch the question whether money is a value in itself because his only point is to show that, *to measure value*, money did not have to be a value itself; but this still left open the possibility that in fact it has a value (155). In primitive economies all kinds of objects served as money, viz., cows, salt, tobacco, furs, etc. However money later developed, in the beginning it must have been something of value for it to be exchangeable for other things. That one exchanged valuable things for a printed piece of paper presupposed the development of a system by which one could exchange valuable things for paper (156). For no one would be so foolish as to exchange something valuable for something as worthless as a piece of paper, *unless there were a system in place whereby the piece of paper represented something of value*. But that system could develop only over a long time; and at first what served as money were things of value, viz., cows, salt, tobacco, furs, etc.

But the more extended and multiple services money had to provide, and the more quickly it circulated, the more its *functional* value overshadowed its *substantial* value (158). Modern exchange strived to reduce money as a substantial bearer of value, and it had to do so because even the increased production of precious metals could never cover all exchange transactions (158–159). What promoted the development of money as a functional value, whereby paper could represent value even though it had no value itself, was not the comparison of things themselves but their relationships to other things (162, 163). "One of the great steps forward of humanity took place", Simmel writes, "when two quantities were compared not immediately but each in their relationships to other quantities" (162). Our view of the world arose from our capacity to compare "not only just two things, but the *relationships* of each to two other things" (163).

II.

Simmel warns us that we should not infer money has no value at all just because it has no substantial value, or just because it is used as a medium of exchange (173). When gold and silver are used as money, then they lose their value for technical or aesthetic ends; but if we cease to use them as money, they still have their value for such ends. We have to choose between their

value as money or their value as utility (*Geld oder Gebrauchswert*) (174). If objects have several possible functions, of which only one is actualized, the question arises of how the meaning and worth of the actualized function depends on the unactualized ones (174). The value of something in the human world often depends on what it leaves out or behind, Simmel notes (175). The value of an art work, for example, is that it pulls us up from all the conflict and turmoil of the emotions of ordinary life; but without these emotions, it would not have its effect on us. More generally, the value of so many experiences in life depends on having excluded so many others. The intensity of the lived experience depends on the appreciation that it is the only one of so many other possibilities (176).

Simmel says that the same general point applies to the value of money. Though it is certainly correct that its other values (viz., technical or aesthetic) play no role while it is serving as a means of exchange, they still can determine its value. The feeling for the value of money grows because we sacrifice other things for it. It is not that these other things act on us in some covert way; but that they do *not* act on us, gives the money its value (177).

We can imagine worlds or situations, Simmel maintains, where money has no value at all. If we could have everything we want just for the asking—like the chiefs on South Sea islands who cannot steal because they own everything—then no money would be necessary. If we already have everything we would ever want, or if we have no wants at all, then there would be no need for money. All this goes to show, Simmel thinks, that money has its value solely as a medium of exchange; when we have to exchange things to get something we want, then we have need for money. Where, however, there is nothing to exchange, money will have no value (179). Money is therefore an expression of the interdependence of human beings (179).

One reason the ideal of a perfect correspondence between the proportions of money and goods is never attained is that the money supply is increased without a corresponding increase in the supply of goods (185). One would think that an increase in the money supply would bring about a corresponding increase in prices, so that, for example, doubling the supply of money would bring about a doubling in the price of goods. There should then be an equilibrium between the value of money and the value of goods. But Simmel explains that it does not always turn out this way. The increase in the supply of money does not bring about a corresponding increase in prices. The problem is that people, from habit or prejudice, are not willing to pay the increase in prices for the same goods (191). They are too accustomed to the old prices.

Ideals are all too often not realized, Simmel reminds us, because they need the elements that they strive to eliminate (196–197). If they were perfectly realized, they would destroy themselves. Effective activity requires something

to strive against; it requires that there is a struggle between itself and its opposite, so that one increases only if the other decreases. But if there is no struggle at all, then activity itself ceases (195). The same applies to the substantial value of money and its purely functional or symbolic value; the ideal is for money to have a strictly and entirely symbolic value, so that the substantial value eventually disappears. But if this ideal were ever fully reached, money would lose even its symbolic or functional value (196).

III.

In the third section Simmel wants to discuss the historical appearances of what he has been discussing in principle, i.e., how the essence of money achieves its pure meaning yet still appears in its substantial forms (199). Money will show itself as part of the general development by which the substantial dissolves itself into "free floating processes" (*freischwebende Prozesse*). He will treat "the functional meaning" (*Funktionsbedeutung*) of money and its increase to the point where it conceals or covers its substantial meaning. This will involve tracing how money is determined by "the constitutions and needs of human beings living together" (199).

The attempted demonstration of the resolution of the substantial meaning of money into its functional meaning is not as radical as it sounds, Simmel warns us. For in strict sense the substantial value of money is really nothing but its functional meaning. As much as one prizes the precious metals as substances, one still values them for their functions, because they decorate, honor, distinguish, provide aesthetic pleasure, etc. Their value never lies in their mere being but in what they perform; their substance alone, apart from what they do, is the most indifferent matter in the world (199). Of the great majority of things in the world, one finds them valuable because of how they *interact* with other things; the feeling of value is based on their *effects* (200).

The medieval view of money saw it as something static and substantial (200). The disapproval of interest goes back to the medieval belief that money is a substance which does not have the function of making more money. For the medievals, money is an *ens per se* and its meaning is not lost in the web of economic exchange (201). They did not understand that money is not an object which *has* a function but that it just *is* a function.

The opposite of the medieval view was that of the credit economy (*Kreditwirtschaft*) (201). For the medievals, the ruling idea was the substance of money and not its effects, where its effects were reduced to a minimum; but for the moderns, the core point is the *acting* substance, which tends toward reducing substance down to its actions. The medieval view was supported by the old categorization of the world into substance and accidents. The functional value of money was classified among its accidents whereas its real value was substantial and remained the same despite its changing functions.

Simmel suggests that we can consider both fiscalism and mercantilism as species of materialism (206). Just as materialism maintains that the mind is based on matter, so those standpoints hold that social-economic life is bound to money as a substance. The difference between fiscalism and mercantilism corresponds to the cruder and more sophisticated forms of materialism. The cruder form of materialism holds that representation is something material; it claims that the brain causes representations like the liver produces gall and the glands make fluids. The more sophisticated version of materialism maintains that representation is not material itself but *a form of motion of the material*, so that thought is like light, warmth and electricity in consisting in vibrations of physical parts (206). Fiscalism corresponds to the cruder form because it claims that the interest of the government is to have at hand as much cash (*bare Geld*) as possible; mercantilism corresponds to the more sophisticated form because it holds that the point of money is to stimulate the economic activity of the country. Both hold that the value consists in the substance of money; but they differ in how they view that substance: either as something external or as something functional.

Simmel relates economic views to political constitutions (206f). Fiscalism corresponds to the medieval constitution where the ruler had an external relation to the country he ruled, where his aim was to get as much money from the country as possible. The ruler would even sell part of his land for money. The centralized and despotic modern state was dominated by mercantilism where the aim of the government was to invest as much money into the country as possible. The growth of liberalism saw the emergence of a more functional view of money, where gold and silver were seen as mere instruments to stimulate economic activity (207). In opposition to the materialistic doctrines of fiscalism and mercantilism, Adam Smith's doctrine could be described as "transcendental" (208). It sees the power driving money as something immaterial rather than material.

Simmel raises the question: What is the relation between people who make an exchange based on money? The sociological basis of their relationship is the relationship between individuals and the central power which issues or guarantees the money (213). When natural exchange is replaced through money, there is a third party between the individuals: the social whole, which provides the money with a corresponding real value (*Realwert*). This is the core of truth in the doctrine that all money is an instruction to society. The main tendency of the modern economy is for the substantial meaning of money to disappear behind its functional meaning through the organization of government (224). Money has become a public institution; it consists in what public power makes of it and how it legitimates it.

Money can work as a means of exchange only if people believe in it. Faith is central to the working of the economy; people must *believe* that money

will serve as an instrument of exchange (215). Simmel approves of the dictum inscribed in Maltese coins: *non aes sed fides* [no value but faith]. But just as in religious faith, the faith in the value of money cannot be based entirely on reason (216). We believe in the value of money because we have faith in the government. "The feeling of personal security confirmed by the possession of money is the most concentrated and refined form and expression of faith in the state-social organization" (216).

The chief function of money is not to be a preserver or transporter of value; rather, it is to be a condenser of value (*Wertkondensator*), so that it is capable of representing a sum of value in one unit; the more value it compresses into one unit, the greater its power (246). Simmel says that one can call this "the spiritualization of money". For it is the essence of spirit to make multiplicity into unity; in empirical reality everything is *next to* one another; but in spirit everything is *in* one another (246). Money becomes money only to the extent that its substance disappears, and only to the extent that it becomes spirit, where all its power is concentrated into one. It is the deepest misunderstanding of money when one thinks its transformation from substance to function makes it worthless (248). This fails to see, Simmel says, that the functions into which money resolves are themselves the source of its value. At first money can perform these functions because it has a value; but then it has a value because it performs these functions (248–249).

The belief that money consists in something of value Simmel regards as an hypostasis (212). Its real value consists in its stimulating and supporting the exchange which takes place between particular people. Money has a double nature: it is a concrete and valued substance (viz., gold, silver), but one which still has its meaning in the complete resolution into movement and function; hence money consists in, as Simmel puts it, "the hypostasization, as it were the becoming flesh of a pure function, of the exchange between people"[21] (212).

6.7 Chapter Three: Money in the Series of Ends

I.

Since money is a means to obtain something else, Simmel first examines the means-ends relationship and then the role that money plays within it.[22]

There cannot be anything like "an immediate purpose", i.e., a purpose that realizes itself. A purpose can be realized only through some modification of nature, i.e., it can be realized only through some action (257). This action

21 "[*die*] *Hypostasierung, gleichsam in Fleischwerdung einer reinen Funktion, des Tausches unter Menschen, besteht*" (212).

22 On Simmel's argument in chapter III, see Annika Schlitte, "Die neue Kategorienlehre: Mittel Und Zweck", *Simmel: Philosophie des Geldes*, pp. 125–144.

mediates the purpose with external existence; it is the bridge by which the content of the purpose proceeds from its psychic form into reality. The purpose is therefore bound to have some means. On the one hand, the purpose is distinct from a mere mechanism which involves no end; and on the other hand, it is distinct from the will of God which proceeds directly from will to satisfaction without any intervening interval (258). There can be no purpose for God because there can be no means for him.

The process of acting toward goals (*der Zweckprozess*) is an interaction between the willing ego and external nature (258). The mechanism that takes place between the will and nature is on the one hand a connection, and on the other hand a separation. The connection takes place with the satisfaction of the will. The separation signifies the impossibility of the will to get its satisfaction without going outside itself; it presents the obstacle that it must overcome. The action in which our will realizes its ends shows us the double character of the will: we feel the resistance of the object in nature and the directing energy in ourselves that will overcome it (259).

The idea of a means reveals the position of man in the cosmos (264). He is not like an animal which is limited by its instincts and the mechanism of its drives, and which enjoys an immediacy of willing and enjoying; but he is also not like God whose power is such that whatever he wills immediately becomes a reality (264–265). Man stands in the middle between animal and God; he can will something beyond the immediate present, unlike an animal, but he can achieve his purpose only through a series of means. The means and its intensified form, the tool, are the symbol for the prototype of man (265).

Money is the purest form of a tool (263). It is an institution by which an individual invests his action or goods to achieve goals that were inaccessible to him through his direct efforts. Many institutions are made for the express purpose of achieving certain ends; but money is not like that: it has no relation to the particular end which it helps us to achieve (264). For money is indifferent toward any particular purpose; it can be used for all kinds of purposes and therefore for none in particular. Money is the "purest reality" of the idea of a means; it is that concrete means which is equivalent to its abstract concept (265). But insofar as money has no relation to a particular end, it achieves a relation to the totality of ends (267). It is that tool in which the possibility of not foreseen expenditures or uses (*Verwendungen*) is at its maximum. In this way the meaninglessness of money—i.e., the absence of reference to particular purposes—is the abundance of its practical meanings—i.e., it can be used for anything (267).

II.

Simmel introduces the theme of "the psychological expansion of qualities", i.e., in a series of objects, powers or events, the value we place on its final

member extends to the other members (292). For example, all the members of a family share in the fame or disgrace of one member; all poems by a certain poet are prized only if one or a few are good. This expansion of qualities is especially apparent in a series of ends; the means for the ends becomes evaluated positively or negatively depending on the end (293). The end has an absolute value and the means only a relative one; but the value of the end is expanded to the means, so that it *seems as if* the means has an absolute value itself.

While the creation of a purpose depends on a spontaneous act of will, the relative worth of a means depends on theoretical knowledge (294). We need *to know* that the means actually produces the end. The spontaneity of the positing of a purpose, together with the fact that the means participates in the value of the end, makes it seem as if the means is an end itself. This is another instance of the psychological expansion of qualities.

It is by no means certain, Simmel maintains, that we reach our ends most effectively when we are most clear about them in consciousness (295). Although we are at first conscious of the purpose of an action, we do not always think of it, Simmel observes, because that consciousness disappears in the execution of the action itself. Because so much of our attention has to be focused on the means of attaining an end, we do not think of the end itself; the real practical task consists in the production of the means; having the end always in mind would deflect from this (296).

Simmel is so intent on removing final causes, or purposes, as the cause of action, that he wants to replace them with his own version of efficient causes, with what he calls "physical-psychic energies" (295). We must keep the self-evident in mind: "that our action is never caused by a purpose as something that will be, but always by a physical-psychic energy that comes *before* the action" (295). A purpose (*Zweck*) he defines as "this real physical-psychic potentiality as mirrored in a conceptual consciousness" (295).

Simmel also wants to dispel any idea of unconscious purposes, as if the causes of certain actions or events were purposive though we cannot be aware of them. This idea was very widespread in the 1870s, having been the central theme of Eduard Hartmann's massively popular *Philosophie des Unbewussten*.[23] Simmel says that this idea explains nothing and only gives a new term for the problem. The concept of unconsciousness is that nature achieves intelligent ends on its own even though it is not conscious of them. Earlier, in section II of chapter II, Simmel argued against the theory of unconscious representations, claiming that it rested on a fallacy (184). Because we are not aware of any representations as the cause of an action, we invent the

23 E. v. Hartmann, *Philosophie des Unbewussten. Versuch einer Weltanschauung* (Berlin: Carl Duncker's Verlag, 1869).

cause of *unconscious* representations, though we have no evidence for their existence. We only have the right to proceed *as if* certain representations are unconscious causes, but no right to assume that there *are* actually such representations, he argued.

The process of expansion, whereby the quality of an end is transferred to the means, is especially apparent in the case of money, Simmel says (298). No other object that is a means takes on so thoroughly and quickly the quality of a purpose as money. The more effective money becomes as a means, the more desirable it appears. Simmel writes of "the inner polarity in the essence of money": it is an absolute *means* that makes it for most people an absolute *end*. This polarity finds its counterpart in the apparently contradictory "double demand" (*Doppelforderung*) of life itself: that we should live every moment of our life as if it were our last; and that we should treat every moment of life as if it were a means to an end (299).

The transformation of money into an absolute value went along with the great turn of economic interest away from agricultural to industrial production (299). The difference between modern life and classical Greece came from the fact that money served *consumption* in classical Greece but it served *production* in modern life. Production in classical Greece was limited to agriculture, which required no great investment of technical means. The moral precepts of the Greeks regarding the economy never concerned the acquisition of goods; only consumption was a matter of ethical concern (300).

It is difficult to regard any action in a series as its end point; every point we reach is only an interim stage toward a final one (303). No one stage is what we would call its final purpose (*Endzweck*). The concept of a final purpose is like the horizon which always recedes no matter how near we come to approaching it. We regard every stage in a series of actions toward a final purpose as the next to the last. It is a heuristic regulative principle that no goal of our will is the final one, but everyone opens the possibility of ascending to a higher one. The final purpose is the function of a demand (*eine Forderung*). This means that we regard every state as a means to an end and no state as the end in itself (304). Whether we regard a moment in the series as means or end depends on our standpoint; it is not an absolute distinction (304).

In what must be one of his more outrageous passages, at least for the religiously minded, Simmel likens money to the representation of God (305). In its "psychological form" it has "significant relations to the representation of God", he says. The idea of God is what brings unity to all the multiplicity of the world; it is the *coincidentia oppositorum*, as Nicholas of Cusa called it. But money too is the point of unity of innumerable ends. People have a trust in the power of money like they have a trust in the power of God. Money gives security and peace like the contemplation of God (306). Simmel cites the saying of Hans Sachs: "*Gelt ist auff erden der irdisch got*" (307). [On earth money is the mundane god.]

Simmel spends much space and energy with two common phenomena that illustrate how money becomes an end in itself: miserliness and avarice (*Geiz und Geldgier*) (308f). What is important for the miser and the avaricious is the *possession* of money; they do not spend it to satisfy personal ends (308). They are not especially concerned with the value of the objects they collect; what is important to them is that, whatever their value, they possess them (310). For the miser, there is never disappointment in what he can buy with money for the simple reason that he never spends it. The miser knows money better than anything else, only because there is nothing to know about it; it does not conceal or hide anything, and so there are neither surprises nor disappointments with it (316). Since money is a source of power, the phenomenon of miserliness is a form of the "will to power" (318). It is precisely in possessing money, not imagining all the things that he could buy with it, that the miser enjoys power; once he spends the money, his power will disappear (319).

III.

When we are striving for money, we give it a definite *quality* (339). We cannot describe this quality; it is a certain shimmer, a certain warmth, which is the result of the interests, hopes and efforts we invest in trying to obtain it. Money has this *quality* independent of the question of its *quantity*, of how much. Our desire for money gives it its quality; but once we have obtained it, the crucial question about it is its quantity (340). Since money is nothing but an indifferent means to all possible purposes, its quantity is really its only important property; the crucial question about it is not *what* or *how* but *how much*. The limitation of the interest in money to the question of how much—or *that its quality consists exclusively in its quantity*—has significant consequences for his investigation, Simmel says (340).

Simmel points out how small or negligible differences in quantity often make for huge qualitative or psychological differences for people. He gives as one trivial example: that poor people with small bank notes are hesitant to cash them while rich people with large bank notes insist on redeeming them down to the last penny (341). People risk money in investments by playing off the probability of a loss against the size of the gain; but there is always a degree to which they will not risk anything, no matter the probability of gaining much for it (342). Often people risk their entire fortune when they can invest it through many small payments rather than one large sum; the smaller payments appear to lessen the risk, though, in the end, it is all the same (342). People will not invest in health insurance policies because the risk of falling ill seems so remote against the cost (343). In all these cases, differences in quantity, though small or negligible, make for large difference in people's behavior or lives.

Simmel also points out that quantitative increases in the causes of phenomena do not always have a corresponding increase in their effects (344).

An increase in the intensity of a cause does not always result in a corresponding increase in the effect *on higher levels of a scale*; to get the same increase in the effect as in the past one must increase the intensity of the cause. There is what he calls "the threshold of economic consciousness", according to which stimuli under a certain threshold have no economic effect (345). This means that there is no absolute measure of quantity but only a relative one, i.e., it is only through the *difference* between one sensation and another that we can determine the quantity of a sensation (348).

Despite his skepticism about measuring phenomena, Simmel tinkers with the idea that we can measure the pleasure we take in various objects in terms of their monetary value (351–352, 354). Money is a stimulus for all possible feelings; and because of its unqualitative, unspecific and uniform character, it can serve to measure differences in value between them. When a gourmet, a book collector and a sportsman enjoy very different pleasures, that is not because of their very different specific qualities but because the objects that cause them have different prices (352). In modern times there is the possibility of a uniform and universal monetary standard, because the middle classes aspire to the standards of the upper classes and the lower classes to the standards of the middle classes. There is indeed a tendency in economic culture to make the more expensive cheap and to make the cheap more expensive (353).

Whatever the value of these speculations, Simmel thinks that they are completely in accord with the main tendency of modern science: *the reduction of qualitative determinations to quantitative ones* (366). This tendency is especially apparent in money, which should be a symbol of the triumph of the quantitative in life. The fact that so many more things have their value measured in terms of money, and that money has become such a central and absolute value, shows that things finally will have value only to the extent of their cost; the quality that we give them in feeling will be a function of their higher or lower price (369).

6.8 Chapter Four: Individual Freedom

I.

In this section Simmel considers the effect of money upon human freedom. He argues a thesis flatly contrary to the Marxist view which sees money as an instrument of capitalist domination.[24] Seen from a broad historical perspective, Simmel finds the introduction of the money economy as a powerful means of liberation.

24 See Marx, "Zur Judenfrage": "*Das Geld ist dem Menschen entfremdete Wesen seiner Arbeit und seines Daseins, und dies fremde Wesen beherrscht ihn, und er betet es an*". MEGA (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1974), I, 375.

Simmel begins with a broad generalization about human fate: it is an unbroken alternate loosening and binding, of freedom and obligation (375). But what we feel as freedom is often only a change in duties, since in the place of an old duty a new one inserts itself. When we are free from an old duty, we feel the loosening of the old burden and for a moment we feel as if we are free forever—until the new duty imposes itself. This pattern does not always happen in the same way; the feeling of freedom will be longer, more intensive and more conscious in some cases rather than others; it depends on the obligations we were freed from. Some obligations give greater freedom to the obligated than others. There are obligations for the personal services of others, for the performance of a specific action, or for a specific object (376). These obligations allow different degrees of freedom for the obligated. The obligated might be completely bound in his or her person, which in the most extreme case is slavery; but the obligated might only have to perform a specific action, leaving him or her free in all other respects.

In the Middle Ages serfs would pay their lords with a share of their produce (377). It was important to the lord only that he receive the correct kind and amount, which left the serf free in how he produced and supplied it. In principle, the serf was free to have someone else to supply his share; but in practice, this was rarely possible. The serf had to invest his personal energies in the production of his share. This all changed beginning in the 13th century, when the serf no longer had personal obligations to his lord but could use money to pay for his obligations (378). The self was then free from an obligation to produce a specific product and could produce whatever he wanted as long as earned the necessary amount for this obligation to the lord (379). There was a connection for many, therefore, between payment in money and liberation (380). The resolution of obligation into payment came when the obligated could pay the full capital (*Kapitalzahlung*) amount rather than just payment in interest and installments (*Zinszahlung*) (380–381).

If one begins with the view that the amount of goods in the world is finite, then it follows that what is given to one is taken from another (383). The satisfaction of one can be only at the expense of another. This view of the world is a pessimistic-quietistic one (383). If, however, one begins with the assumption that the goods of the world are infinitely expandable, that technology is capable of ever greater advances, then the satisfaction of one need must not be at the cost of the other (385). Change in possession can then be for the advantage of both parties. The advance of culture then depends on *exchange*. Simmel thinks that we can define the distinguishing feature of human kind as the exchanging animal (*das tauschende Tier*) (385).

The tragedy of human competition is mitigated by the process of culture when much of the content of life becomes objectified (386). We can enjoy books, art, culture in general, knowledge in all its forms, where the enjoyment of one person does not diminish that of another. The more value is

invested in such forms, the more people can enjoy them. The power of a human being to consider things objectively leads to one of the noblest results: the construction of a world which can be appropriated without pushing aside others (386).

What the realm of culture achieves through its objective forms the realm of exchange achieves through the interchange of possessions (386). Exchange also controls impulse and selfishness through objective norms and reciprocity; exchange requires complying with standards of fairness (387). Exchange creates a growth of value. Money helps exchange in two ways: through its divisibility and its utility (388). It ensures that both parties to an exchange benefit (388).

Simmel argues that the money economy promotes individual freedom by creating a specific kind of dependence (392f). The modern economy has created all kinds of new dependencies through specialization and technology; the individual is dependent on many others to perform their specific tasks and to operate the technology. But it is not dependent on any *specific* individual; it is dependent on others only as those who perform tasks and roles, which could be many individuals. The individual is independent of the *personality* of the others on whom it depends; the functions of others could be performed by many possible individuals (396). "The general tendency makes the subject more dependent on the performances of many more individuals, but also more independent of their personalities" (394). The personality of the individual is as indifferent as "a guest in a hotel" (395). Simmel contrasts this state of affairs with life in the past when each individual was dependent on a minimum of individuals, those one could know personally (395).

The question remains how this kind of dependence promotes freedom. We are still dependent on others in having to perform a specific task within the division of labor. The wage laborer would seem to be no better than "only a slave in new dress" (399). The worker is now free, however, to quit his employment and to change his employer. The opposite of freedom, Simmel contends, is not obligation or being bound in general, but being bound to a specific individual (398). The slave could not quit or change his master; in having just this power, the wage laborer has taken a step toward "personal freedom" (399).

II.

Among the movements of life, one usually considers earning (in the wide sense of working) and enjoying. Possession appears not as a movement but as a static condition, relating to movement as being does to becoming. In opposition to this common view, Simmel counters that possessing is also an activity, a kind of movement (405). It is a bad habit, he says, to regard possession as something passive and static, requiring no activity on the part of

the owner. Possession that involves no activity on the part of the possessor is a mere fiction. In old German lands, it was necessary to cultivate the land to keep it in possession. The right to property was the latent condition of actively enjoying or cultivating the land, and the guarantee that one could enjoy or do something with it (406). Possession in its original form was the right to use something; it designated nothing more than the series of active or possible "measures and enjoyments", "enjoyments or uses" of a thing (406, 407).

The possessor is dependent on his possessions (409). Earning and use of possessions requires certain capacities on the part of the owner; he is not completely free in the use of his time and he must have certain qualifications to own or operate things. Money changes this connection between being and having (*Sein und Haben*) because the owner need have no special qualities for ownership other than having money. Just as all roads lead to Rome, so do all economic ways lead through money; just as Irenäus said Rome is a compendium of the world, so Spinoza wisely said money is *omnium rerum compendium* (410).

Money brings an important shift in the concept of property (412). What distinguishes property from its momentary use is that it can be used in any time and in any way. The fact of property means that the owner can use or enjoy it now, or in the future, in all kinds of ways; it is the security that no one else can use or enjoy it (413). Money gives its owner even greater powers because it guarantees the right to enjoy or use all kinds of things, i.e., whatever can be bought (413). In that way money is a higher degree of that general right to property (*eine höhere Potenz des allgemeinen Eigentumsbegriffes*) (413).

The money economy has made possible the formation of those vocations that function beyond the economic realm, viz., teachers, artists, scholars and government officials (416). Money has the power, because it is the most sublimated economic value, to free us from the economic side of things. The activity of artists, teachers, scholars and officials is measured by objective ideals and their subjective satisfaction. The economic success of their activity is not a function of satisfying their ideals.

The distinction between having and being (*Haben und Sein*) in the money economy was important in realizing the concept of freedom (418). Simmel understands freedom as an inner division of labor, as the reciprocal loosening and differentiation of all drives, interests and capacities. A human being is free when it develops its individual energy according to its own goals and norms (418–419). Freedom is independence and following one's own nature in the development of all one's qualities, powers and impulses (419). One's freedom is impaired the more one has to develop it in a one-sided and specialized way (420). The value of having money is that it frees us from having to develop our powers in such a way. It is economic power in general and freedom from having to serve particular interests and goals; it therefore allows

a maximum of freedom for purely intellectual activities (421). Hence the intellectual flourishing of Florence lay in the fact that it cultivated banking interests compared to Genua and Venice, which were merchant cities. The nature of banking demanded less labor directed at particular things, and so it allowed for the formation of higher interests (421).

It is one of the great achievements of money that it reduces the greatest multiplicity to one common denominator (428). All specific forms must be brought into the common *Urelement* and find freedom in a new form. Through money land became private property; yet as land was sellable, it became separated from the owner, who could sell it at a price profitable to him (429). The money economy therefore created a separation between land and proprietor or owner.

As much as money separated being and having, the owner and land, the separation between the ego and its property also diminished (433). The ego found its property as an extension of itself. The acquisition of possession was a growth in the personality beyond the individual (433). If freedom means that the will can develop unhindered, then it seems the more freedom one has the more one possesses (435). If freedom means the privilege of using a thing, then freedom was limited only by the things it could not possess (435). The extreme on the scale of freedom in this sense is money, because money is completely at the disposal of those who possess it; they can make what use of it they will (437). Yet money is also the least of all things at our disposal because it lacks all content. "We have it more than anything else; and we have it less than anything else because there is no content to it" (437).

III.

Simmel articulates a proposition which will be an important presupposition of his whole argument: that all higher economic technique rests on the independence of economic processes, i.e., they are separated from the immediacy of personal interest and function as if they were ends in themselves; their mechanical course is less and less interfered with by the irregularities and unpredictabilities of the personal element (448). This economic development, Simmel reminds us, is still human and subjective; even though the running of a factory is like that of a machine, it is still subject to the "personal ends" of human beings (448).

The role of money in this process of differentiation is to separate the subject from his possessions (448). The stock-owner who has nothing to do with the running of a business, the land owner who has rented out his parcels of land: these allow their possessions to be cared for and cultivated though they have nothing to do with them. This is all possible through money. The long distance effect of money allows the possession and the possessor to be so

far apart that each can follow its own laws (449). This gives freedom to the owner and to the possession (451).

The economic organization of earlier centuries, which consisted in handicraft and small business, rested on a personal relationship of subordination of the apprentice to the master, the employee to the employer (451). The businesses were of a personal and immediate nature, and the apprentice or employee fell under the personal direction of the master or owner. The objective and technical elements eventually overshadowed these personal ones. Everyone in the process of production—master and apprentice, employer and employee—fell under the rule of technical and objective ends. Still, there was an element of freedom in this new order because the employee was no longer subject to the subjective and personal ends of the owner (451). The modern worker grew in self-confidence; he was no longer subject as a person to the whims of the employer but performed a service which left his personality free to the extent that his business was technical, impersonal and objective (452).

Through this economic development it is possible to remove certain difficulties attributed to the money economy (453). The anarchist is horrified by the domination among human beings where one person commands and the other obeys. But Simmel thinks that this subordination, which is necessary for the running of the economy, is no worse than a society of complete equality (453–454). Socialists would have to admit that their absolute ideal is not the equality of individuals but a mere means of getting rid of certain feelings of suffering. The problem is then to retain subordination but to remove those feelings. One comes closer to this ideal when all subordination is only a technical form of organization (454). One must separate *the person from the form of organization, so that the individuality, freedom and inner feelings* of the person are untouched (454). Personal honor and dignity must stand beyond all subordination; it is necessary to realize that all command and obedience is a "mere external technique of organization" (*eine blos äusserliche Verfassungstechnik*) (455). What Simmel wants to see is "the personal differentiation of the worker as a human being" from the objective conditions of production (455).

The separation between person and thing that is the product of the money economy eventually becomes a separation *within* the single person, who becomes divided into different interests and spheres of activity (462). Money develops the economic interests of the personality separate from the whole of the personality; but now the rest of the whole becomes the sum of psychic contents and energies after separating out the economic interests (463). One can describe the effect of money as "an atomization of the individual personality" (*eine Atomisierung der Einzelpersönlichkeit*) (463). While in the premoney economy, the individual was dependent on its group and the exchange of services bound the individual to it, now the individual carries his demands to the group in the form of money. He has the choice when, where

and how he pays for services, and so he dissolves the immediacy of these relations with others (463). The individual can now enter a group based on money payments; and he can dissolve his membership whenever he retracts his funds (465). Money allows someone to join a group without sacrificing his independence (466).

Socialism can be understood as a reaction against the money basis of group membership (468). It reacts against the "heartlessness of money" and enthuses about the feelings for the group. Socialism aims for a rationalization of life and wants to abolish all arbitrary and individual elements through the lawfulness and calculation of the understanding; yet it still keeps the old communistic instincts, which linger in the distant corners of the soul. In this double motivation one can see a tension within socialism: it is rationalism but also a reaction against rationalism (469).

6.9 Chapter Five: The Money Equivalent of Personal Values

I.

The meaning of money in a system of values becomes apparent when money is used as a form of punishment or compensation (*Geldstrafe*) (482). The most conspicuous example of this is expiation for death through a payment of money (*Wergeld*).[25] In Anglo-Saxon England financial compensation for the death of the king was set at 2700 schillings, though such a sum was imaginary because it was unobtainable. At the time of the Magna Charta, knight, baron and count stood to one another as schilling, mark and pound. Money made possible, Simmel says, "a purely quantitative representation of the value of a human being" (482). Money was not only the measure for a man, but man became the measure for money. The monetary unity became the sum paid for the death of a person (483). The worth of a human being became the ground of determination of the monetary value.

Since money rests on quantity, and since money is an empty concept without a determination of the question "How much?", it is necessary that every system of money has a unit from whose addition or subtraction, from whose multiplication or division, one can determine every monetary value (484). The size of this unit is indifferent as long as one can determine all values from it. This unit comes to represent the feelings of value in a culture, the equivalent of the value of some object or performance.

The importance of money as a measure of personal value becomes clear when the *Wergeld* is taken as a measure of legal oaths and testimony

25 *Wergeld* was the amount of compensation paid for the injury or murder of a person. It is from old English, *wer* (man) and *geld* (tribute or payment).

(486–487). The higher the *Wergeld*, the more value was given to the oath. Only the free person had a *Wergeld*, the unfree none at all. In medieval Florence obligations and protections were determined in inverse proportion to *Wergeld* (487).

Once the *Wergeld* was determined for a person of a definite status, so that it was the same for all people and for all cases, the representation developed that this was the *worth* of the person (488). The value of the person did not depend on what different subjects gain or lose from a person's life but upon the legally fixed and objective *Wergeld*. This fixing of the value of *Wergeld* was a means of avoiding disputes and conflict. This led to the culturally-historical idea that the totality of a human being could be measured by money (488). This idea appears in blood-money (*Blutgeld*) and in slavery. The difference between our modern way of thinking and blood-money and slavery is, when expressed in economic terms, a merely gradual or quantitative one (488). It does not contradict our modern feelings that money damages are paid for injuries or for the breaks in marriages (488). The death of a person is a merely gradual difference from such injuries or breaks (489).

Simmel notes: this economic way of considering things is not currently valid. This is because we have been educated for centuries according to the Christian tradition, which rests on the idea that the human being has an *absolute* value (489). According to this tradition, the value of a human being stands above all relativities, all particular powers and expressions; it is incapable of any quantitative determination. This denies the foundation of slavery and blood-money. The Christians were slow to act on the full consequences of this doctrine; hence they did not condemn slavery and even promoted *Wergeld* (489).

Christianity gave the masses the idea of a final purpose of life, an absolute value of existence, above all the determinations and changes of life (491). It left the idea fixed in the soul that there had to be a final purpose of life; the decline of Christian doctrine left it unfulfilled. We moderns feel the need for a final purpose but we have lost the content that would fulfill that need (491). Modern man has lost religious feeling though he still feels the need for some final purpose, for some end that would reconcile all his values in a single comprehensive worldview. He still has, however, the doctrine of the absolute value of the human soul (491).

The value of the personality, which excludes all comparability according to a quantitative criterion, can have two meanings: it can refer to humanity in general, or it can refer to a human being as a definite individual (492). If it is the qualities of a person that determines its worth, then one contrasts one individual against all others, who do not all have the same qualities. Then individuality has an intrinsic worth. But in Christianity, in the Enlightenment of the 18th century and in socialism, the value of humanity rests in simply being human; in this respect all people are alike (493).

The idea of the expiation of the criminal developed from compensation for the destroyed or damaged to the idea of punishment (494). All punishment can be rationalized in two ways: the protection of society or compensation for the victim. The idea that punishment stems from a desire for revenge ultimately goes back to the rationale for the protection of society; the need for protection makes it necessary to make the inflictor of harm into the harmless. The utility and necessity of punishment has then evolved into a drive of its own: doing harm to the harmer. The origin of punishment then goes back to the drive for protection (*Schutztrieb*). The idea of punishment as a means of compensation is not interested in the subjective motive of the actor but in the utility of the punishment for the victim (495). But this changes when an objective power, like the state or the church, takes over the business of expiation. Because the damage done to the victim is no longer a personal event but a disturbance of the public peace or a violation of an ethical or religious law, what is done to the violator becomes essential. Now financial punishment (*Geldstrafe*) is no longer a compensation for damages to the victim but a harm or pain to the doer (495).

The increasing distance of personal worth from monetary value, which made financial punishment the lowest form of punishment, eventually encountered a reaction (500). The reaction to injustice and damages increasingly limited itself to cases where damages were expressible in monetary terms. In city life, where economic concerns were increasingly dominant, the significance of a person was interpreted in monetary terms. If there could be no monetary equivalent for damages to a person, a case was not prosecuted at all (502). Compensation demanded a financial punishment; and when none could be formulated, there was no punishment.

The monetary equivalent for personal value is especially prominent in the case of bought marriages (*Kaufehe*). The feelings of degradation (*Entwürdigung*) modern people have about bought marriages are not always justified when applied to earlier periods (504). Bought marriages by no means are confined to lower stages of cultural development. As degrading as money for a woman (*Frauenkauf*) might seem in higher levels of society, it can be elevating for lower levels (505). It was elevating for two reasons. First of all, the organization of marriage through purchase was a significant step forward from the crude practices of robbery or kidnapping of the wife (505). Bought marriages did not take place in an individualistic economy; it was heavily regulated by social practices and traditions. Bought marriages are therefore for Simmel a first step in the socialization and normativity of sexual relations (506). The other reason bought marriages are elevating is that the money paid made the woman appear valuable. Possession leads to love for the possession. Having so much money in the woman, she had to be treated with respect and kindness (507). Money marriages, though they are indeed degrading in some respects, are uplifting in others because they supported the

sentiment that women are worth something (507). Another uplifting aspect of bought marriages: they set a limit to polygamy because one could pay only so much. Payment would make the woman paid for seem all the more valuable.

Money is the appropriate reward for prostitution (513). Money does not bind one person to the other, it is always accessible, and it is always welcome. Money can be separated from the personality (513). Money is never appropriate, however, for love. There is something of the essence of prostitution in money: it is indifferent and it is a mere means (514). Prostitution is the perfect expression of a degradation to a mere means. The woman suffers more from prostitution than the man. The woman gives her whole self in sex while men give only a part of their personality (517).

The degradation of personal integrity which is felt for every marriage that is not made from individual inclination is a modern phenomenon; it was not found in more simple cultural circumstances (520). The increasing differentiation of society made it seem inappropriate to enter relations between individuals on other than individual grounds. In a society with less differentiation it would seem indifferent which couples marry. The marriage can take place for other reasons than individual inclination. In a differentiated society inclinations of the heart are more common. Perfectly compatible couples, who are personally attracted to one another, are difficult to find and this is one reason for the decline of marriage (521).

The most personal virtues—that the powers we invest in marriage follow our own instincts, that a woman gives herself only as the man replies with his own feelings, that words and deeds are the expression of convictions—are values that *we are* and not just values that *we have* (533). Insofar as we abandon these virtues for money, we surrender our *being* for our *having*. This distinction is not entirely clear in theoretical or objective terms; but it is a measure of what we value. Being and having (*Sein und Haben*) are value concepts (*Wertbegriffe*) (533).

The personal ideal by which we maintain our dignity amid all the temptations and vicissitudes of life Simmel calls "nobility" (*Vornehmtheit*) (535). The social meaning of nobility means "an exceptional position against the majority, the enclosure of individuality in an autonomous realm" (535). "The noble human being is the entirely personal, who holds in reserve his personality". "Nobility represents the singular combination of feeling difference, which rests upon comparison, and the proud refusal of all comparison" (535).

The noble character is completely indifferent to the question of "How much?" (537). It is aware of itself as completely unique and incomparable. The moment it considers the question of quantity and asks for the money equivalent of thing it loses its foundation. The opposite of nobility is considering what a person has in common with others, which stems from the typical relation of the money economy.

Simmel's Nietzschean ideal comes to the fore most clearly when he writes: "What is common to human beings—according to its biological side the oldest and most certain inheritance—is in general the cruder, undifferentiated, and unspiritual element of its being" (538). Simmel now criticizes the money economy like never before; its governing power is "the degradation of all individuality" (*eine Herabsetzung der Bedeutung ihrer Individualität*) (539). The exchange of things is that it brings them all down to a common level (*die Nivillierung*) (540). The money economy is destructive of the value of individuality; it imposes on things a criterion alien to them and that makes them common to all other things (541).

II.

In the chapter on individual freedom Simmel said that the transformation of natural duties into payments (*Geldleistungen*) served the advantage of both parties: it resulted in greater freedom and dignity for the obligated (*der Verpflichteten*) (542). Now he says the meaning of money for personal values will be complemented through a development in the reverse direction.

In the past people would give services for their obligations rather than a money payment. For their services, they would receive certain rights and privileges within the community. But these were weakened or disappeared when they paid money instead of giving their services. The transformation of personal obligations into a money payment degraded the power of the obligated (543). They were no longer integrated, active and contributing members of the community when their services became money payments. The aristocrats felt invalidated and degraded when their personal service were substituted with money or a bureaucratic administration (544). Christian subjects declared themselves ready to serve with their person, but to contribute with money was the business of Jews and Moors (545). *Summa summarum*, there were despotic tendencies behind the reduction of duties to monetary obligations (545–546).

A despotic constitution which strives for the unconditional obedience of its subjects will demand financial payments from them (547). Payment is the easiest way to show obedience for the subject. A clever despot will demand for payment what will allow the subject the greatest possible freedom (547). Payment in money does allow the subject the greatest freedom (548). The worst form of exchange between the government and the individual is when the government buys the property of the individual. This deprives the subject of what gives his freedom its worth: a dependable object of personal activity (549). The reduction of the subject's land to a monetary sum throws the subject into the state of the proletariat. A subject who has his land bought from him gains in *negative* freedom, i.e., the mere absence of constraint; but

he loses in *positive* freedom, i.e., a meaningful and productive form of creative activity (550).[26]

III.

Simmel raises the central question surrounding the labor theory of value: whether work is the source of value in general (563). The attempts to reduce all economic value to a single source arose from the efforts to bring all value down to money. Such a reduction would seem to guarantee the possibility of exchange and hence the value of labor. When one makes nature alongside labor the source of value—one says that work is the father and nature the mother of wealth—then one goes too far because nature is not private property and belongs to everyone alike; it is not possible to use it, therefore, as a source of exchange.

Simmel considers the labor theory as the philosophically most interesting of the theories of value (564). In labor the powers of man have a unity; it unites physicality and spirituality, intellect and will. Labor is the unifying stream in which all qualities mix. It puts the source of value where it should be: in our *practical* nature. If the *products* of labor are not the source of value, then it should be the *power* of labor.

Simmel examines one specific form of the labor theory, one which values physical labor (*Muskelarbeit*) over other forms (565). It sees in physical labor the measure of all labor in general. Simmel says that it is a mistake to see this form of the theory as only "proletarian spite" (*proletarischen Trotz*) or "a principled degradation of intellectual work". It is said of the share of the mind in work that it involves no deterioration (*Abnutzung*) and therefore does not increase the cost of production (566). That leaves only physical labor as the source of the exchange value. Of course, the work of the intellect is involved, both in guiding the hand in producing something and in the invention of a product. But the work involved in designing a product is minimal compared to the work of actually producing something according to the design (567). The design itself is not of economic value, because it does not deteriorate and because it is the public property of everyone (567).

Simmel sees the value of reducing all economic values down to physical labor: this would reduce the qualitative measurement of objects, which is always uncertain and inexact, to a quantitative one. This would be all part of the socialist striving to reduce all values to economic ones as "their starting point and substance" (568). Yet this striving, Simmel reckons, works only in

26 On Simmel's theory of freedom in *Die Philosophie des Geldes*, see Christian Thies, "Die materielle Wertlehre und individuelle Freiheit", *Simmel: Die Philosophie des Geldes*, pp. 159–174, esp. 164–166.

the economic sphere, where one can indeed find an equality of all individuals. It does not work in other spheres—the ethical, aesthetic, intellectual, characterological—where there is no such equality (568).

The claim that economic worth is based on labor does not suffice, Simmel argues, to prove social and political equality (569). One could maintain that all people are equal as laborers; but this would not prove that they all produce *the same quality of labor*. It would still be possible to maintain that a less quantity of *higher* labor was worth more than one of *lower* labor; there would then be another principle of quality, one which could not be derived from labor as such (569).

Yet Simmel still thinks that it is possible to defend the labor theory in the face of the objections of different qualities of labor. When one person's labor seems higher than another, one could reply that their higher labor is the result of *more* labor (572). If the performance of a concert pianist is regarded as higher than a ditch digger, though the ditch digger will sweat and toil more than the pianist, it is because there is much more labor involved in the performance *if* one considers its whole background, viz., the hours of practicing and training and the whole tradition behind them (573). Differences in the value of performances come from differences in the quantity of the work that has been invested in them (574).

Simmel reminds us that the concept of work is only negative: it is what remains when we have abstracted from specific kinds of work (575). It is so abstract and empty as the theory that all humans are humans. The concept of work therefore requires greater precision. It is still not completely excluded, Simmel contends, that a mechanical equivalent of psychical activity can be found (576). Although the *meaning* of psychical activity will elude a mechanical equivalent, the *power* an organism needs to produce such meaning is still as calculable as a muscle movement (578). The degree of power needed for such a movement could be taken as the measure of all psychical activity. Simmel concedes that this sounds as if it were "a scientific utopia"; but he thinks that such apparent materialism is no more nonsense than that involved in dualism. The final goal of explanation would be "a certain proportion between the values that we consume and those we produce, i.e., that the latter, as mental performances, would be functions of the muscle performances involved in the former" (580).

Simmel realizes, of course, that what makes work labor is not sheer physical exertion, the stiffening of muscles. Work is effort, trouble, difficulty; where these are not present there is not work at all (583). No one takes up work without the thought of compensation for his suffering and trouble. What gives someone a title for a reward for work is the *psychic* expense of energy, what one must take upon oneself in overcoming the inner resistance and feelings of displeasure (583). Hence he concludes: "With respect to value one can say that muscle work is psychic work" (584). From the perspective of value,

one can say that the difference between mental and muscle work is not that between psychic and material nature, but that even with material nature one is talking about the "inner side of work", about the summoning of the power of will (585). For this reason one can say that the reduction of labor value to muscle work loses its "banal and brutal materialistic appearance" (586).

6.10 Chapter Six: The Style of Life

I.

Our practical world is governed more and more by the intellect, which determines the means for ends. The means for ends become more complicated, so that the realm of the intellect expands. The element of feeling diminishes, which concerns more the ends than the means (594). To determine means for ends requires the knowledge of natural laws, so that the problem of achieving ends becomes one primarily for the intellect (594).

There is a parallel between the realm of the intellect and that of money: both can be characterized negatively through their characterlessness (594). The intellect is an indifferent mirror of reality in which all elements are equally justified; but money too is indifferent for whom it serves and what it serves. All people are of equal value from the viewpoint of money. Money can serve the most evil machinations and the most noble of ideals.

The web of teleological series in modern urban life has no other content beside earning money (596). The objectivity of human interactions rests on their purely economic character, which is expressed in money (601). The fact that people are interested in money for so many different reasons shows that it transcends subjective individuality (601).

The universality of intellectuality, insofar as it works for every individual intelligence, works toward the atomization of society; everyone seems to be a self-enclosed element (606). There is an apparent equality in this since everyone seems to have the capacity to achieve the same goods; but this is a mockery (*einblutiger Hohn*): just because no one is prevented from achieving the same goods does not mean that everyone has the *capacity* to do so. This inequality creates an aristocracy whereby the educated rule over the uneducated (606–607). Intellectuality serves an egoism and differentiation; the rational and logical which appears in egoism rests on the most ruthless exploitation from the possession of money (608).

The mental function behind the modern world, which governs its interactions and relations, one can characterize as *calculating* (*rechnende*) (612). It treats the world as one big calculation and expresses everything in numbers (612–613). As Kant said: there is only as much science in a discipline as there is mathematics in it (613). It was the money economy that brought the ideal of mathematical calculation into practical life (614).

II.

The contents of culture designate things that have reached a level of achievement beyond what they would have done by their natural development (617). A natural energy is the presupposition for the concept of culture; but culture goes beyond mere nature. The values of life are a *cultivated* nature; they are developments based on a foundation which we call nature; but they go beyond that insofar as they are culture. To be culture, they have to be also based on will and intellect (617). Insofar as man cultivates objects, he makes them into an image of himself; they are the transnatural cultivation of his energies (619). But there is an indeterminate border between the concepts of culture and nature; it is unclear where the one begins and the other ends (619–620). This does not render the concepts of nature and culture illegitimate anymore than the concepts of night and day are illegitimate because there are degrees between them (620).

Simmel raises the question about the meaning of culture in general because he wants to discuss a question that falls within the realm of culture (620). He notes that the things within culture—tools, means of transportation, the products of science, technology and art—have become increasingly sophisticated; however, the culture of individuals has become more impoverished (620). The discrepancy between the culture of things and the culture of human beings has grown wider (621). What explains this phenomenon (622)?

There is one cause of this discrepancy, which Simmel formulates in a single phrase: division of labor (*Arbeitsteilung*) (628). The increasing division of labor in modern society, its growing differentiation in function, means that each individual does and knows less than people in the past. A single product is the work of many individuals, so that no individual alone has the power and knowledge to produce it. The increasing physical and psychical energy that is necessary to perform one function takes away from that necessary to form the whole personality (628). The more the product of labor is the work of many hands, the more it is alien to a single laborer and seems like a power that dominates him. The more the product is the work of many souls, the less soul it has (648).

III.

The relations of modern man to his environment have developed so that he is more distant to his most intimate circles, and he is more close to the more distant ones (663). Family bonds have become looser, the feeling of being suffocated in the closest circles, the increasing emphasis on individuality—these are all factors whereby the closest become more distant. Yet there is also a connecting to the most distant, an interest in what is far from us, a feeling of community with circles having no spatial proximity.

The role money plays in this double process is at first an overcoming of distance (663). The translation of values in the form of money makes connections possible that have nothing to do with the spatial distance of those interested. Money makes it possible for a German capitalist to take an interest in the yields of African goldmines, or in the results of a South American revolution (663–664). The loosening of family bonds also stems from money interests because it provides the basis for each individual to sustain himself outside the family. Money permits a thorough objectification of transactions, an exclusion of all personal factors (664). In this manner there arises an inner limit between people, which makes possible the modern form of life. Without such distance, the crowdedness and proximity of modern urban life would be insufferable (665). Money provides "an inner protection and balance against the all too compressed intimacy and friction of our cultural life" (*ein innerer Schutz und Ausgleichung gegen die allzugedrängte Nähe und Reibung unseres Kulturlebens*) (665).

The money interest has increased our distance to not only other people but also to things (665). We do not stand in an immediate relationship to the objects of commerce but our interest in them is only through the money we spend on them (666). Our entire life is characterized by our distance from nature (666). Through credit we have an even more mediated relationship to the things we own (668).

7

KANT

7.1 A Kant Scholar

In 1904, Simmel published his *Kant, Sechzehn Vorlesungen gehalten an der Berliner Universität*.[1] The book was based on lectures which he gave in Berlin in the Wintersemester 1902/1903; but it also incorporated several writings on Kant, most of them published in the early 1900s.[2] There were four editions of the lectures published in Simmel's life time. The edition used here is the fourth edition of 1918, which is the basis of the *Gesamtausgabe*.[3]

The book was long in coming. Simmel had been concerned with Kant since the very beginning of his career. We have already seen how he devoted his doctoral dissertation to Kant. His first lecture at the University, in the Summer Semester of 1885, was on Kant's ethics; and, virtually every year thereafter, he gave at least one lecture course on Kant.[4] Simmel wrote his book in May, June and September 1903 while vacationing with his family in Florence.[5]

1 Georg Simmel, *Kant. Sechzehn Vorlesungen gehalten an der Berliner Universität* (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1904). GSG IX, 7–226.

2 These writings are "Was ist uns Kant?" (1896) *Vossische Zeitung, Sonntagsbeilagen* Nr. 31–33, GSG V, 145–177; "Kant und die moderne Ästhetik", *Zeitgeist, Beiblatt zum Berliner Tageblatt,* 12 Oktober 1903, GSG VII, 255–272; "Die Lehre Kants von Pflicht und Glück", *Das freie Wort,* Jahrgang 3, Nr. 14 vom Oktober 1903, GSG VII, 255–272; "Kant und der Individualismus" (1904), *Vossische Zeitung,* Nr. 7, Morgenausgabe vom Januar 6, 1904, GSG VII, 273–282.

3 There is little secondary literature on Simmel's Kant lectures. But see Sebastian Luft, "Abhandlungen zur Philosophie Kants", in *Simmel Handbuch,* pp. 247–256.

4 See "Lehrveranstaltungen", GSG XXIV, 607–637.

5 Editorischer Bericht, GSG IX, 424.

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Simmel's interest in Kant came during the great renaissance of Kant studies in Germany at the end of the 19th century. Simmel knew personally some of the great scholars in the field, among them Hans Vaihinger, Heinrich Rickert, Ernst Cassirer and Emil Lask. Simmel's work on Kant ranks—in its rigor, clarity and depth—among the very best in this field.

It must be said, however, that Simmel saw his work only as an introduction for a general audience.[6] He did not want to produce a contribution to Kant scholarship in the strict sense, to what he disparagingly called *Kant-Philologie*. As he explained in the "Vorwort", he wanted to understand Kant's problems and solutions insofar as they were relevant to "the questions of life" (*Lebensfragen*). The "*Schulbegriff*" of Kant's philosophy had to give way to its "*Weltbegriff*".

What follows is a brief summary of each of the lectures.

7.2 Lecture One

Simmel tells his audience that his lectures will have nothing to do with the biography of Kant. He admits that for the understanding of a philosophical worldview it is important that all its parts are understood from the unity of a creative personality. Yet he insists that this personality—Immanuel Kant—is not a real historical being but an ideal construction (*ein ideelles Gebilde*); he is a symbol or expression for the connection of all the parts of his philosophy (13).

The proper understanding of the personality of Kant therefore comes from *the work* of Kant. As Simmel puts it emphatically: "Exactly the work of Kant is the 'personality' of Kant…" (14).

The overestimation of the external life of a philosopher confuses the origins of a philosophy with the philosophy itself, Simmel insists (13). Yet it was odd to find Simmel stressing the separation between a philosopher's life and his doctrine because, only a few years later in his *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*,[7] he would maintain that a philosophy expresses what type of person one is.

Having eliminated the biographical from his interests, Simmel proceeds straightaway to the interpretation of Kant's philosophy. He takes issue with a very common interpretation, one that maintains that the central interest of Kant's philosophy is practical, that it lies not in thinking but in willing (15). According to this interpretation, Kant's "basic tendency" is to make practical

6 See the "Vorwort", GSG IX, 9.
7 *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter, 1910). GSG XIV, 28.

action the chief concern of his life, into the ultimate tribunal of his thinking.[8] Against this, Simmel declares: "Kant and his system are completely intellectualistic…". For Kant: "The norms of thinking are valid for all areas of life…" (15). No feelings or instincts are the basis of his philosophy, as with Plato and Epicurus, Plotinus and Bruno, or even Spinoza and Hegel. It is a philosophy created by and for the intellect alone.

The perfect example of Kant's intellectualism is that he makes the logical norm determine the morality of the will (16). Kant taught that what determines the moral worth of an action or personality is the will alone; but then he also said that the value of the will is decided by reason, by logical norms alone. The uncompromising rigor of Kant's morals stems from his "logical fanaticism", which imposed upon all life the form of mathematical exactitude.

It was completely in accord with this intellectualism, Simmel thought, that Kant's examples from moral life were ordinary and banal (16). What was decidable by intellectual means alone were the most obvious examples (viz., the cheating merchant, the person entrusted with a deposit), and so Kant limited himself to these kinds of cases. He did not consider all the more difficult cases: the finer points of a conflict, the complications of feeling, the dark motives within us (16). Only what was completely penetrable by logical thinking could be admitted into his philosophy (17).

7.3 Lecture Two

Simmel, like Hermann Cohen before him, rested Kant's philosophy upon "the fact of science", i.e., that the result of the sciences are valid (22). It was an absolute presupposition for him that experience is a legitimate source of knowledge. An *individual* experience can be wrong or an illusion; but the *whole of experience* cannot be. In other words, Kant simply does not question, as the skeptic does, the legitimacy of knowledge in general. Kant was concerned with contradictions *within* knowledge but not with any questions that would undermine knowledge as such (23).

There is a problem with this standpoint. The implications of Hume's skepticism are that no scientific law can claim legitimacy; its claim to universality and necessity is indefensible because it rests on inductive generalization, which can be true only as we have observed so far. It was Kant's intention to reply to just this kind of skepticism. Arguably, Simmel and Cohen were allowing Kant to beg the question against Hume. Neither

8 It is not clear who, if anyone, Simmel has in mind here. He cites no texts. *Kants Weltanschauung* by Richard Kroner is an obvious candidate; but it did not appear until 1914, ten years after Simmel's lectures.

Simmel nor Cohen offers a reconstruction of Kant so that he replies to Hume's skepticism; they leave Kant's reply to Hume's skepticism hanging in the air.

Simmel reconstructs how Kant's philosophy mediated between rationalism and empiricism. The rationalists were right: there is knowledge of a universal and necessary kind that cannot come from experience; they are the forms and functions of our mind by which we form experience, and which cannot be corrected by experience because they are the conditions of any possible experience. But the empiricists were also correct: only experience gives us knowledge of what is the case; experience consists, if only at first, in the impressions of the senses, which form the material of knowledge (23–24). The rationalists went astray, however, in claiming that the forms of reason are valid not only as conditions of experience but also as means of knowledge of what is beyond the sphere of the senses. Because these claims transcend experience, because they therefore cannot be confirmed by the only source of evidence about existence, they are for Kant a source of illusion.

Simmel is sympathetic to Kant's synthesis of rationalism and empiricism. This synthesis recognizes a principle of great importance: that the true view of the world must be the result of *all* spiritual energies (27). No solution to the problem of knowledge can be true that recognizes only one source of knowledge, whether it be sensibility or understanding. The Kantian solution to the problem of knowledge makes it a principle that *the whole intellect* knows, not only the senses or the understanding alone (28). But, Simmel insists, it is still possible to go a step further: that *the whole human being* knows. It is not only the intellect alone that is involved in knowledge, but imagination, fantasy, love and the sense of beauty. All parts of the human being are active in the search for, and construction of, knowledge. This broader humanist view Simmel attributes to Goethe, who held that knowledge requires that *all* elements of life in a person must be active.

Simmel finds it necessary to correct Vaihinger's interpretation of the principles of reason as "fictions". It is as if these forms are a kind of "self-deception" (*Selbstbetrug*) (25). This interpretation is misleading, Simmel argues, because it presupposes that there is a falsehood involved, that these principles claim to be objective but are not. But no such claim is made for the principles of reason; they are explicitly recognized in their regulative function where their only claim is to be useful in organizing or synthesizing our knowledge. In their regulative function they no longer make a claim to knowledge, and so cannot be false.

Simmel objects to Helmholtz's claim that Kant's views of geometry have been falsified by the development of anti-Euclidean geometries (32). Kant never claimed that Euclid's axioms were logically necessary; he admitted that there were other spaces in which other non-Euclidean axioms could hold. Kant's claim was that the axioms of Euclidean geometry are valid only for

our *human* experience; and with that limitation his theory of geometry, Simmel thinks, is perfectly valid.

7.4 Lecture Three

Simmel investigates the meaning of Kant's doctrine of the a priori, and to do so removes some historical misunderstandings of it. The first misunderstanding is the conflation of the doctrine with the theory of innate ideas. Simmel insists that the a priori is the *inner* condition of certain knowledge claims and that is not a temporally preceding cause of them (36). The temporal cause of these claims, or how they arise psychologically, is not Kant's concern. All the language about innate ideas preceding knowledge, about them being the basis for what is built upon them, are only metaphors (37).

Simmel thinks that Kant's doctrine of the a priori gave to people more certainty and security in life than is really necessary (38). That the a priori forms have universality and necessity is an ideal; but it is not so important and decisive for modern man as it was for Kant. We have grown more modest, Simmel says; inductive certainty appears sufficient for our knowledge and we do not demand universality and necessity. The demand for incorrigible knowledge Simmel regards as a "philistine misjudgement" about human beings; it fails to recognize that man is "the betting being" (*das wagende Wesen*), someone who is willing to take his chances in life. A person who always has to reckon with chance has a much greater trust in life, he believes, than someone who wants a 100% guarantee before he undertakes anything (39). Behind the Kantian a priori there lurked, Simmel suspects, "a secret skepticism about life". Remarkably, in thus downgrading the need for the a priori, Simmel stands much closer to the positivists (viz., Laas, Jodl, Mach) than the neo-Kantians.

Simmel insists that Kant's primary interest is not in the knowing subject but in science itself (39). He asks under what conditions is science possible, where these conditions are about its logical possibility, not its psychological possibility. The basic question concerns the objective structure of science, which has nothing to do with the dynamic of its psychological genesis (40). To this extent, Simmel's understanding of Kant's project is perfectly Marburgian, agreeing with Cohen's analysis in *Kant's Begriff der Erfahrung*. Yet no sooner has Simmel said this than he qualifies it. There are two sides to the a priori, he writes (40). One side concerns the ideal space of pure science, detached from all questions about its psychological origins; the other side concerns how this space is brought into being according to the dynamic of life, where it is "a psychological event" (*ein seelisches Ereignis*), one going on in the very depths of the soul. In allowing for this other psychological side of Kant's philosophy, Simmel was correcting the overemphasis on its logical or epistemological side.

It was a problem for Kant how he could show that any specific principle is a priori (41). An a priori principle should have universality and necessity; but to determine *which* principle has such status depends on "a more or less accidental discovery, a never certain observation prone to mistakes and imperfections". Kant did have a criterion for the correctness and completeness of the a priori forms: their systematic structure. But symmetry and architechtonic is no guarantee at all, Simmel charges, for the *truth* of the a priori forms (42). In any case, it is asking too much for the knowledge of the natural sciences to conform to such a systematic structure (44). Even the norms that govern science are themselves subject to further development, and there is no guarantee that they will be forever the same.

Another limitation of Kant's analysis of the a priori is that he conceived it only in application to the natural sciences (44). He thought that the general principles of natural science had the same universality and necessity as the a priori concepts themselves; but these principles have no such certainty and we can best approximate their certainty through the progress of infinite enquiry. Kant also excluded social science and history from his analysis, though the historical and psychological world should be also examined according to their a priori presuppositions (44–45).

The basic problem remained how Kant could demonstrate the validity of his a priori concepts. He argued that they are conditions of all valid experience. But how do we know what is valid experience except by showing the norms involved in it? The circularity is obvious (46). We have to distinguish the cases where a priori norms are applicable from those where they are not; those where they are applicable have certainty; but with what right do we claim this certainty except by presupposing the truth of the norms? The norms seem to be the judge of themselves, so that we are still caught in a circle (47).

Kant's philosophy presupposed the validity of experience, Simmel says, so that its entire validity is questioned as soon as one raises the question whether experience is valid (50). Pragmatism saw the limitation of Kant's philosophy: that it cannot defend itself as soon as one raises the question of the legitimacy of experience itself. Unlike pragmatism, however, Kant never wanted to subordinate the intellect to other sources of authority than itself; he could defend science only within science.

7.5 Lecture Four

There is a problem with Kant's doctrine of judgments of experience: that they are supposed to have universality and necessity because they are produced according to the laws of the understanding; but what experience teaches is always fallible and it can always be retracted (54). There is a double value

to judgments of experience: they have a certainty and validity beyond sense experience; but they are also flexible and correctible.

Simmel finds only one way to solve this problem. Everything that is a priori is not in and of itself knowledge; it is only an empty schema, an abstract formula, which gains its meaning only through the matter of experience (54–55). All knowledge moves between two poles: on the bottom rung, the judgment of perception, which does not say anything about the object or anything beyond the individual case but only confirms the state of sensation of the subject; at the top rung, the a priori statements that are universal and valid for all objects but are only the empty form for all knowledge of reality (55). The judgment of experience stands between these two poles. What degree of certainty an individual judgment has on this scale depends on the kind, frequency and intensity of sense impressions, which incite the functions of the categories of the understanding. Because the judgment of experience is always dependent on the senses, it will never reach the status of complete universality and necessity; when it attains such status, it will be only the form of judgment and not a judgment proper. It is only in its pure concept, in its never attainable perfection, that a judgment of experience has that universality and necessity in distinction from the judgment of perception (56).

Simmel stresses how even the knowledge of sensible particulars depends on the operation of the understanding (60). To represent an object as spatial, for example, the understanding must synthesize unlocalizable sense impressions, moving from one to another until they form a definite object. The spatiality of objects is the synthesis that the mind forms from the relation of the elements of sensation. This doctrine—that the form of things is a doing of the knowing subject—is "the core of Kantian idealism" (61). Simmel stresses that we must not understand the creative activity of the understanding psychologically; any psychological events would be within the experience that is to be grounded. Hence he calls the forms of objectivity that are the product of the activities "*überpsychologisch*", though what exactly this means he does not explain.

7.6 Lecture Five

This lecture finally treats a central topic which Simmel had not touched on the earlier four lectures: the Kantian subject, i.e., the ego that is the foundation of all experience. Kant's "great thought", Simmel says, is "that the objectivity of things lies in that unity which our soul confers upon them" (69). "With this thought the whole achievement of Kant perhaps reached its greatest extreme in depth." But what exactly did Kant mean by this thought? Simmel spends the rest of his lecture explaining it.

He meant that "the inner form of the ego"—i.e., the unity of apperception, or the "I think" that accompanies all representations—creates the unity

of things, that it is that which makes them into objects. As he also puts it: "Exactly the most inner form of the ego is the motive and power by which things become objects, by which representation become truths outside the ego" (70). Simmel says that this idea realizes the old mystical doctrine "that man takes possession of the purest truth of things by plunging into his own depths" (70).

No sooner does Simmel acknowledge the mystical sense to Kant's idea than he says it is necessary to correct some of its popular interpretations. He first notes that the ego that creates the objectivity of the world is neither the personal ego nor the soul (71). He also stresses that the objectivity created by the ego is only the *form* of experience, and that it does not create any of the specific things that are unified by it (73). The ego is nothing but "the function" by which things are brought into unity, so that it is "something completely indeterminate and empty".

The ego dissolves itself in the content of the world as only "the form and function" by which it becomes knowable (75). As only the form of objectivity, the ego loses its special place in the cosmos and disappears into the world itself.

7.7 Lecture Six

Lecture six discusses the Kantian doctrine of space. Simmel maintains that Kant's theory of space is the most difficult part of his philosophy and that its understanding is one of the greatest tasks of the history of philosophy (81).

Simmel first raises the question: if space is only the manner in which we represent things, why do we sense it as if it were something outside ourselves? He begins with the most orthodox of Kantian explanations. The spatiality of things is only a formal relationship of sensations; their spatialization is an action of the subject, an act called their intuition (78). Why our sensations order themselves in space is a question that Kant does not investigate; that they have a spatial order, rather than some other kind of order, is just a fact from which we have to be begin.

To the question why we represent space as outside ourselves, Simmel sticks to the line that they are not really outside ourselves, that the "outside ourselves" is really a form of consciousness itself (81). Of the things that we seem to perceivoutside ourselves he simply states, in italics, "*They remain within*" (*Sie bleiben darin*). The object is not placed in space but the object is spatial because its representation has the form of spatiality. The spatialization of the object, its extensiveness, is a "function of the soul" (81).

What makes Kant's doctrine of space so difficult to understand, Simmel thinks, is the ambiguity of the word space. It can mean, as Kant intends it, the spatiality of things, the form of sensations that makes them an object of experience; but it can also mean the more popular representation of the

empty receptacle in which all individual things exist (80). Because the popular representation is so engrained and persistent, we remain confused. We have to understand, Simmel says, that the form by which we represent things in space is not in space itself. We understand the space in which we perceive things as if they were *in* space itself, and so the old popular image of space as a container persists (82).

Regarding the notorious and fraught question of the thing-in-itself, Simmel says that the whole question of the existence of the thing-in-itself has to be absurd for Kant, because the existence of something can be answered only *within* the framework of his theory of knowledge (86). For this reason, it was never Kant's intention to bother himself with the question of the existence of the thing-in-itself. When Kant wrote about a thing-in-itself as the cause of our sensations, when he distinguished it from appearances, he was talking only *within* the realm of experience itself; he did not mean to postulate some cause of experience in general (87). Here Simmel anticipates the later position of Erich Adickes.[9]

7.8 Lecture Seven

This lecture treats the subjects of time, self-awareness and the mind-body problem.

Simmel treats the paradoxical Kantian doctrine that the subject knows itself only as an appearance. This is the immediate consequence of the constraints Kant imposes on all knowledge. All knowledge is subject to the concepts of the understanding and the forms of intuition. We know ourselves, therefore, only insofar as our representations of ourselves conform to the concepts of the understanding and the forms of intuition. What the self is in itself, apart from and prior to the application of these concepts and forms, is therefore unknowable (91). Kant's theory of self-knowledge, Simmel duly notes, is a remarkable break with the Cartesian tradition. In Descartes, knowledge of the subject and object were on an unequal footing: the subject knew itself immediately and with certainty; the object could be known only through inference. For Kant, however, both the subject and object are on the same footing: both are knowable only as appearances (97).

In treating the concept of time, Simmel stresses the importance of Kant's concept of reproduction (93). There would be no past or future for us if the past were not reproduced in the ideal form of memory. We need to have the consciousness that we think now is the same as what we have experienced before. Otherwise, without reproduction, our world would reduce to a single instant, which is no more a part of time than a point is a part of space (93).

9 Erich Adickes, *Kant und das Ding an sich* (Berlin: Pan Verlag, 1924).

We then read a strikingly proto-Heideggerian sentence: "Confronted with the question of *being*, the past is nothing; it is as if it never were" (93; Simmel's italics). Time is no more a continuous empty line, in which we set our representations, than space is an empty receptacle. Time is nothing more than "the form of perception" (94).

Simmel discusses Kant's response to the mind-body dualism. Kant denies the fundamental assumption behind the dualism: that the mind and body are distinct substances, things-in-themselves which exist apart from our consciousness of them (98). Both are only appearances of one and the same consciousness; the problem of their correspondence is only how different kinds of appearances form a single experience. Like Kant, Simmel slips too easily over the problem how such different kinds of *experience* can form a unity; the ideal of unity seems as unattainable in a Kantian setting as in a realist one.

One of the great advantages of the Kantian solution, as Simmel points out, is that it denies any advantage to materialism. He repeats the arguments of Friedrich Lange: that materialism is a metaphysical hypothesis no less than idealism; it finds reality not in experience but in a substance that transcends experience.[10]

Simmel sees in Kant's solution to the mind-body problem the triumph of his intellectualism. Kant reduces the object to the scientific knowledge of the object (102). The world forms a unity because the subjective and objective are subject to scientific norms. Kant's intellectualism means that he is not interested in the effect of the world upon the subject, the problem of existence (104). Being is not a value concept (*Wertbegriff*) for him; he knows no passion for the world, how we love or hate it; he is only interested in how we *know* it. For him scientific knowledge of the world is its be-all-and-end-all (107).

7.9 Lecture Eight

Simmel now moves from Kant's theoretical to his practical philosophy.

Simmel finds in Kant's moral philosophy a dualism between "ought" and "is". There is no value in nature; nature is a sphere of necessity, which has neither a negative nor positive value (109). There is no metaphysical meaning behind nature, which is viewed only as "an arithmetical operation of pushing, pulling and striking forces". In his ethics, Kant is a moralist, i.e., he recognizes value only in its moral form (109).

10 See Friedrich Albert Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*. Zweite verbesserte und vermehrte Auflage (Iserlohn: J. Baedeker, 1873). This critique appears throughout the second volume of the second edition.

Simmel finds a paradox at the heart of Kant's ethics: How can the will be free if it must obey a moral law? Kant stresses the importance of the will's freedom; but he also insists that morality is a matter of obedience to the law. How can these be reconciled? Through the Kantian contention, Simmel says, that someone is free only if their will is the source of the moral law; the moral law must come from the will of the subject itself (113). Here the Kantian notion of autonomy is central: that the subject is obligated to obey only those laws that it would give itself. Freedom and morality coincide, Simmel says, when a human being has achieved complete sovereignty over all interests and desires, which happens when he acts for the sake of duty alone (116).

Simmel sees the close affinity of Kant's epistemology with his ethics. Just as his theoretical philosophy ends with the ego as the source of all objectivity, so his practical philosophy ends with the ego as the source of all normativity. Both in the theoretical and the practical realms, the ego is sovereign, the source of all laws, whether they are normative or objective (121).

7.10 Lecture Nine

This lecture treats Kant's categorical imperative, which, Simmel says, is the counterpart of Kant's doctrine of space, both in its popularity and difficulty of interpretation (124).

The categorical imperative reveals the "deep analogy" between the theoretical and the practical a priori. The universality is the same for both realms: a norm for thinking, whether as a condition of experience or as a criterion of morality (125). Hence Kant's doctrine of the unity of theoretical and practical reason: there is one and the same reason which is both theoretical and practical (130). Here is for Simmel further evidence of Kant's "intellectualism": that he makes logical consistency the criterion of morality (131–132).

It is striking that Simmel does not confuse, as many do, the categorical imperative with the demand for absolute validity, i.e., holding under all circumstances and conditions. He thinks that exactly in virtue of its universality the categorical imperative allows the consideration of all special circumstances (127). In other words, one is universalizing a specific action under specific circumstances. Hence what might seem to be the most immoral action—the command to kill someone—could be perfectly universalizable when all its circumstances and conditions are taken into account.

If Simmel thinks that Kant's criterion can avoid some of the most obvious problems claimed against it, he also maintains that it is not the most perfect and functional ideal of morality. It was one of the most cited statements of Kant's theoretical philosophy that the principle of contradiction cannot demonstrate the truth of any proposition; that even false propositions have the merit of not contradicting themselves (133). This point only has to be applied to his ethics: the categorical imperative has no power to prove which maxims

we ought to act upon; it shows only that those are wrong which contradict themselves. "For the selection of the morally necessary from the morally possible this principle does not give the least indication", Simmel says (133).

7.11 Lecture Ten

This lecture continues to consider problems with the categorical imperative.

Simmel sees a problem with his contention that the categorical imperative can take account of the circumstances of an action: if *all* the conceivable circumstances are taken into account and formulated into the law, then the law becomes no wider than the individual case (137). There is then not really a *universal* law at all. There is no a priori principle of procedure which determines which circumstances are to be taken into account in formulating a law (138). In other words, there is no a priori way of distinguishing between relevant or irrelevant circumstances.

Simmel thinks that Kant's treatment of ethical actions shows the influence of his mechanical worldview (139). Kant regards ethical actions as self-sufficient units which can be judged on their own when abstracted from their whole moral context, just as mechanistic physics examines events by abstracting them from the whole of nature. Moral judgment is then like a laboratory experiment which cuts out an event from its natural context (140). Simmel asks if it is possible to judge moral actions from a very different perspective: rather than having the parts precede the whole, the whole precedes the parts, so that an action is understood in the context of all its circumstances (141–142). Simmel here suggests his idea of *individual law*, which will play an important role in his *Lebensphilosophie* (143).

Simmel maintains that Kant never recognized the value of individuality (147). He saw individuality as something given by nature, and not as an ideal which the individual had to strive to realize. The problem with Kant was not a too narrow concept of morality but a too broad one which arose by extending the moral over the entire sphere of value (150). Kant equated the whole sphere of value with morality, so that his philosophy was one of "absolute moralism". This moralism appears best in his dictum that there is nothing in or outside the world that is absolutely good except a morally good will (150).

7.12 Lecture Eleven

This lecture continues the critique of Kant's moralism begun at the end of the tenth lecture.

The narrowness of Kant's moral worldview appears in his alternatives: morality or egoistic pleasure (153). Kant conceived happiness as the opposite of morality, and happiness as little more than pleasure. There was only one kind of pleasure, so that all pleasures differed only in degree rather than

kind (156). "He wrote about happiness like someone who had only learned from the history of philosophy that there is such a thing" (156). Kant thought it was completely indifferent wherein someone found his pleasure, and he failed to recognize the vastly different kinds and sources of pleasure (156–157). Everything in the world stood under the domination of his moral concept of value. Simmel was moved to ask: "…in what soulless, barren world [did] this giant of an intellect live" (158).

7.13 Lecture Twelve

This lecture treats Kant's philosophy of religion.

Simmel's examination of Kant's philosophy of religion marks a break with the standard treatment of this topic in his time. Usually, Kant's philosophy of religion was regarded as a sacrifice of the intellectual standards he had established in his theoretical philosophy. Simmel thinks that just the opposite is the case: he had sacrificed too much of religion in his theoretical philosophy (175). Kant's philosophy of religion showed the same prevailing intellectualism of his philosophy in general: he preserved religion by expressing its concepts in rational terms. But much of the content of religion escaped his rational reconstruction (173). Kant failed to see how much religion involves the striving for holiness, the quest for salvation. What is essential in religion is "the immediate surrender of the mind to a higher reality, taking and giving, unity and opposition" (173). But Kant did not have a glimmering of any of this: "…he had sacrificed religion with its most individual and essential to the moralism and the rationalism of the thinking of his time" (175). The very title of his book—*Relgion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*—shows that he did not understand religion; "for religion is from the beginning (a priori!) something *outside* the limits of mere reason" (171).

Simmel thinks that Kant's philosophy of religion involved no sacrifice of the intellect because it made no claims to prove the existence of God but understood God in the terms of a regulative idea (168). The whole sense of religion is to so act *as if* there were a God. Our duties are divine commands; but we should do them not because God commanded them, but realize that God commanded them because they are duties.

7.14 Lecture Thirteen

This lecture is devoted to Kant's solution of the problem of freedom.

Kant's solution to this problem lay with his distinction between thing-in-itself and appearance (178–179). The principle of causality reigned supreme in the sphere of appearance or nature, so that everything that happened had a sufficient reason for why it occurred so that it could not be otherwise. This seemed to exclude freedom, or moral responsibility, which required the

possibility that one could act otherwise. The space for freedom came with the thing-in-itself, which lay not in the sphere of appearance but in that which is presupposed by appearance. This did not demonstrate the *reality* of freedom, as Kant well knew, but it did show at least its *possibility*.

Simmel notes, however, how this mere possibility became something more: everything that Kant had proscribed from the sphere of nature became compressed into the land of the thing-in-themselves, so that it became a world unto itself (180). Although there was no direct knowledge of it, there was granted to it a kind of indirect or symbolic knowledge. "…so this thing-in-itself became a *deus ex machina*, which one would invoke when natural appearances would not submit to our longing for value, meaning and unity" (181). Kant encouraged all kinds of speculation about things-in-themselves when he said that, though we could not *know* them, at least we could *think* about them (183). The thing-in-itself then became the *locus minoris resistentiae* for every arbitrary misused thought.

Kant seemed to obey some of his own strictures when he famously said that the morality of our own actions was hid from us and that no one could ever judge them with "complete justice". But Simmel insists that this did not go far enough: it was not that we could never judge them with complete certainty but that we really could not judge them at all (186).

7.15 Lecture Fourteen

The chief defect of Kant's doctrine of freedom is that the transcendent self, who stands above all appearances and therefore above causality, stands in a middle position between unknowability and knowability (188). *Ex hypothesi* the transcendent self should be completely unknowable. Without some degree of knowability, however, it would be impossible to judge the moral worth of an action.

Simmel says that Kant suggests a way around this difficulty: that we have an empirical character whose way of acting is necessary but whose original constitution comes from an act of freedom (189). All consequences of its character are causally determined, though the character itself is not so. Simmel does not bother to refute this theory, commenting only that it is lost in "the inaccessible depths of mystical contemplation" (188).

Simmel proposes another solution to the difficulty: it removes the difficulty of the concept of choice by identifying the will with moral action (190). But this creates even more difficulties all its own: How can we be responsible if we can do only morally good actions? If we do not have the power to do otherwise?

Simmel thinks that all the difficulties of Kant's concept of freedom stem from one basic error: that they make a substance out of a function (192). Kant already had an acceptable solution to the problem of freedom in earlier

work: whether man is free or not, he must act *as if he were free*.[11] Freedom is not a faculty hidden within us, Simmel thinks, but it is a maxim of judgment, an auxiliary concept (*Hilfsbegriff*), without which we cannot make judgments about good or evil (192). The substantialized or reified concept of freedom makes us think of freedom as if it were some kind of faculty on its own, as if its removal from the law of causality designated a special kind of existence and place (193). If freedom is understood as a *regulative* concept, Simmel says, then we do not have to go looking for it in some place because it really does not exist at all (193).

7.16 Lecture Fifteen

This lecture examines Kant's aesthetic theory in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.

Simmel finds Kant's achievement in aesthetics ironic and puzzling (199). The *Kritik der Urteilskraft* contains reflection on questions of aesthetic pleasure that anticipate the best of modern aesthetic consciousness; but it is impossible to find their basis in Kant's own experience. Kant grew up and lived in a provincial city of the 18th century, which never gave him the opportunity to see a great work of art. He had little appreciation of good art; and so he prized the verse "*Die Sonne quoll hervor, wie Ruh' aus Tugend quillt*" as a masterpiece of poetic perfection.

Kant saw the aesthetic value of a work of art in its form. This is correct insofar as it means that the work of art should be a unity of a manifold, that its essence should depend on the interaction of its parts (203). Each part should act on all the others, and each part should determine the whole as the whole determines each of its parts (204). In this way there arises the unity and self-sufficiency (*Selbstgenugsamkeit*) that make the work of art a world of its own. Simmel also formulated this principle as follows: "that the work of art as such should not borrow its meaning from what is not art" (206). However much it borrowed its content from the ethical, historical or religious, a work of art comes only from the *formation* of its content (*die Formung des Stoffes*).

As important as this principle is, Kant understood it too narrowly and limited its effectiveness (203). He understood the form as the drawing or design, which he distinguished from color; but color too has formal properties, viz., contrast, which should be taken into account. Kant insisted that beauty should be independent of whatever conformed to all natural, historical and moral norms; but the result of that is that he could not appreciate content and accepted only forms that had no meaning, viz., flowers, ornaments, music without text (204). Kant held that the qualities of a person that were not

11 Simmel does not identify this work. It is most probably *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten,* Akademie Ausgabe IV, 448.

intuitable should have no role to play in aesthetic judgment; but he failed to consider that the whole image of a person, including all his non-intuitable qualities, have an effect on aesthetic beauty (205).

Simmel pays tribute to Kant's aesthetics as one of the first and deepest attempts to reconcile individual subjectivity with the supraindividuality and commonality within the aesthetic realm (213). Although Kant recognized that aesthetic phenomena could not be reduced to conceptual elements and that they ultimately rested on feeling, he still attempted to find something universally valid in them. This, Simmel says, was "the first intrusion of the modern spirit in the aesthetic realm" (213).

7.17 Lecture Sixteen

The last lecture is devoted to the exposition of two concepts of individuality, that which found its expression in Kant's philosophy, and that which appeared in the philosophy of the romantics in the early nineteenth century. The Kantian concept saw the essence of individuality in what all individuals have in common, their universal essence which remains the same in all cultural and historical manifestations. This concept of individuality found its paradigm expression in Kant's unity of apperception, the "I think" that accompanied all representations (219). This "I" was the same for everyone alike and was the basis for a superindividual conception of validity and knowledge. The romantic conception of individuality, which was articulated by Goethe and Schleiermacher, saw individuality as what is different within each person, so that all individuals were fundamentally unalike. This conception was later developed by Nietzsche, who saw the development of the highest exemplars of humanity as the purpose of existence (225). Simmel sees these concepts of individuality as complementary rather than contradictory; he sees no reason against advocating both of them.

8

THE REFUTATION OF PESSIMISM

8.1 The Question of the Age

When Simmel was a young man in the 1870s and 1880s, the chief philosophical controversy of the age was pessimism. That controversy centered around a basic philosophical question: Is life worth living? It was Schopenhauer who first posed that question in his 1814 *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*; but that book first sunk like a rock; it became famous only in the 1860s, thanks largely to the publicity of his few acolytes.[1] Once the public finally appreciated the sheer audacity and bluntness of Schopenhauer's question, an enormous discussion arose about the value of life. In the 1870s and 1880s there were scores of articles, and dozens of books, discussing the merits of Schopenhauer's pessimism.[2] Schopenhauer had his detractors and defenders, who closed their ranks and clashed against one another. The pessimism controversy eventually overshadowed the materialism controversy of the 1850s and 1860s as the most important and pressing issue of the day.

As a young man with philosophical interests, Simmel must have been aware of the controversy swirling around him. We have little evidence about his first interest in pessimism. But it is revealing enough that one of his first lectures at the University of Berlin was entitled "Über den Pessimismus", which he gave

1 On Schopenhauer's rise to fame in the 1860s, see David Cartwright, *Schopenhauer: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 524–548.

2 See Ferdinand Labau, *Die Schopenhauer-Literatur* (Leippzig: Brockhaus, 1880); and O. Plümacher, "Chronologische Verzeichnis de Hartmann-Literatur von 1860–1880" in *Der Kampf um's Unbewusste* (Berlin: Duncker, 1881). Neither bibliography extends beyond the 1880s.

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in the Winter Semester 1885/1886.[3] He then repeated the topic several times, in the Winter Semester 1887/88, in the Winter Semester 1890/91, and in the Winter Semester 1894/95.[4] From these lectures there came articles, and even a book, which we will examine below.

Simmel was preoccupied with the problem of pessimism from his earliest to his latest days. If his first word on pessimism came with his 1885/86 lecture, his last word came with his *Lebensanschauung*, which was published in the last year of his life, 1918. One can find a remarkable development in Simmel's views, from his first article, which accuses the pessimist of facile mistakes in reasoning, to his last, which finds meaning in the pessimistic ethic of self-denial. We will retrace this development below.

Hans Simmel reported that his father had a temperament—what he called a "*Lebensgefühl*"—that inclined toward pessimism.[5] It is impossible to say how this affected his philosophical views on pessimism because his views varied so much: he indignantly rebuts pessimism for its "sadism"; but he also recommends it for its wisdom about the pains of life and the limits of desire. There was an engrained ambivalence, it seems, about pessimism in Simmel's character.

8.2 Methodological Questions

Simmel's first article on pessimism, his "Über die Grundfrage des Pessimismus in methodischer Hinsicht", appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophischer Kritik* in 1887.[6] The article is prefaced with the following abstract:

> The present investigation considers the question in what way, and according to what criterion, pleasure and pain can be weighed against one another; and what are the consequences for the justification of all those claims that the quantity of pain on earth exceeds that of pleasure, or conversely. *(9)*

This is a fair and accurate summary of the article's contents.

Simmel considers these questions because Schopenhauer's arguments for pessimism are based on the claim that the pain of life outweighs its pleasure.

3 GSG XXIV, 607.

4 GSG XXIV, 608, 609, 610.

5 Hans Simmel, "Auszüge aus den Lebenserinnerungen", in *Georg Simmel: Ästheik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende,* eds. Hannes Böhringer und Karlfried Gründer (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976), p. 258.

6 "Ueber die Grundfrage des Pessimismus in methodologischer Hinsicht", *Zeitchrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik,* Band 90 (1887), 237–247. All references in parentheses are to GSG II 9–19.

The overwhelming pain of life means for the pessimist that it is not worth living. Similar arguments were put forward by other pessimists, most notably by Eduard Hartmann, Olga Plümacher and Agnes Taubert. All assume that the criterion for the value of life rests on the relative quantity of pleasure versus pain. Simmel questions their arguments by asking whether it is possible to compare the pleasures and pains of life to reach general conclusions about its value. He disputes the validity of such conclusions.

Simmel begins with a statement that he regards as obvious: the awareness that a quantity of pain exceeds a quantity of pleasure does not lie in sensation itself but in an intellectual (*verstandesmässiges*) judgment (9). This is because the awareness involves a comparison, which is an act of judgment. But even when the sensations are of the same kind—when the awareness that the degree of pleasure A outweighs the degree of pleasure A'—there is still an act of judgment because we have to perceive that the sensations are of the same kind and that A' is included in, and less than, the quantity of A. In making these points, Simmel is taking account of what he regards as one of the most important discoveries of recent epistemology: that representations which appear immediate prove to be, upon closer examination, the complex results of intellectual operations (11).

When the sensations are of different kinds, however, the act of comparing them is all the more difficult. It is impossible to know a priori whether and when pleasure is preferable to pain (10). This is a matter of circumstances, which depend on experience. A being who knows nothing about the distribution of pleasure and pain in life would not know whether he should sacrifice a pleasure to escape a pain, or whether he should tolerate a pain to get a pleasure, or even whether he should inflict a pain because it is the condition of a pleasure. This means that we cannot know a priori how a definite quantity of pain is to be measured against one of pleasure (and conversely).

Simmel asks us to imagine an omniscient being, one like La Place's universal spirit, who can oversee the total amount of pleasure and pain in the universe. He can make mathematical calculations about how much *on average* each individual receives of both pleasure and pain. Since, however, he does not have a criterion which tells him a priori how much pleasure balances how much pain, he will find the assertion meaningless that there is more suffering than pleasure on earth (12).

Simmel also puts his general point this way. We can use the *average* amount of pleasure and pain all people experience in life to determine whether an individual has too little or too much pain in his or her life; we just compare his or her quantity of pleasure and pain with the average. But we cannot make absolute judgments about whether the average is *too much or too little* pleasure or pain, because we have no criterion to measure the value of the average itself (12). We can measure individual cases against the average; but the average itself is beyond measure. We cannot have a criterion to determine

the value of the criterion itself. The problem with the pessimist is that he wants to determine the value of the average itself; he needs a criterion for the criterion where none is to be found.

Simmel says that the whole question can be considered on analogy with the purchase of an object (13). We are asked to imagine someone who offers to buy the whole sum of happiness in his life for all his suffering. The pessimist warns him against the purchase because, for the price, he should receive a much greater quantity of pleasure; the suffering he must offer for the small amount of his happiness is too much. The pessimist's thesis that one must buy the joys of life with too much suffering is therefore like the claim that an object is overpriced. But this claim makes sense, Simmel contends, only if someone else can pay with less suffering for the same amount of happiness. There is no a priori connection between the price and the object, because the price is determined by what others would also pay for it. We cannot say that the object is worth more or less except by what is paid for it on average. Nothing is too cheap or too dear except in comparison with the prices that are on average paid for something. Hence the claim that one has paid too much for the pleasure of life makes sense only if the pleasure can be obtained more cheaply (14).

Simmel conceives another way for the pessimist to maintain his thesis that life is not worth living (15). He need not measure the value of life by some standard of pleasure but by some moral standard of excellence, the fulfillment of which alone makes life worth living. Since people by-and-large fail to achieve this standard, the pessimist can argue, their lives are not worth living. This does away with all the problems of comparing pleasures and pains; and it still gives a negative verdict on the value of life, as the pessimist requires. But the problem with this proposal, Simmel maintains, is that it becomes impossible to balance any degree of evil against any degree of good. From the standpoint of the ideal, no amount of immorality can be tolerated; any amount whatsoever is wrong; and nothing can be redeemed by doing good.

We are still left with the problem, however, of how much good people have to do, and how much evil they have to avoid, to be sufficient to achieve the standard of a good life. What destroys the pessimist's calculations that there is too much pain in comparison with the pleasure of life, Simmel argues, is that even if we have much less pain, that is still far too much (17). Even a very small amount of pain makes a human life not worth living. Schopenhauer himself tells us so, because he says that the mere presence of pain makes non-being preferable to being (18).[7]

7 Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, in *Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Freiherr von Löhneysen (Stuttgart/Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1968), II, pp. 737–738.

8.3 Psychology of Pessimism

In December 1888, Simmel published anonymously in the *Baltische Monatsschrift* a short article on pessimism, "Zur Psychologie des Pessimismus".[8] Simmel raises the interesting question of why pessimism has become so popular. There is an irony to the popularity of pessimism: books that deny all the attractions of life have now become the greatest attraction (223). Simmel excludes from the outset the thesis that pessimism is popular because of its truth and provability; worldviews never become popular for epistemic reasons alone. However compelling the arguments for pessimism might be, they will have little force for the general public. The explanation of their popularity will have to be psychological, Simmel is convinced. It is remarkable, though, that he does not consider *social* or *political* causes for the popularity of pessimism, viz., the failure of political reform in Germany, the economic crises of the 1870s. It is not that he excludes these factors; but he does not include them either. He only wants to see how far a psychological explanation can go.

What initially attracts people to pessimism, Simmel thinks, is its *oppositional stance* (*oppositionelle Stellung*), its spirit of skepticism and negativity (224–225). The pessimist believes that everything that comes into existence also deserves to collapse into nothingness. The pessimist is like Mephisto, "*der Geist, der stets verneint*", who denies the worth of all existence. For many, skepticism is only a transitional phase, one which destroys in order to pave the way for something better; but the pessimist does not grasp negation as a preparation for a higher point of development; the excitement he feels is in destruction for its own sake (225).

Part of the attraction of pessimism, Simmel thinks, is that to deny everything opens up the exciting prospect of the infinite; it seems as if anything can be true. One wants to deny any posited proposition because it seems to block the way into the infinite. Hence negation has a much more comprehensive and enticing character than position. This aspect of negation is especially appealing to youth, Simmel says, because it promises a liberation from the yoke of authority (226). All authority will have to posit something of value and defend it; but just that acts like a red rag to the youth, who are inspired to doubt whatever old age and wisdom impose.

Simmel also finds an element of sadism in the attraction of pessimism (227–228). Destroying rather than building is a more pleasant activity. "The joy in destruction" (*Freude am Zerstören*) is a "remarkable characteristic of human nature". What explains it for Simmel is the extension of

8 Anon. "Zur Psychologie des Pessimismus". *Baltische Monatsschrift* Band 35, Heft 7 (1888), 557–566. GSG XVII, 223–233. Why the article appeared anonymously is unclear. Its authorship has been established by Klaus Christian Köhnke, GSG XVII, 493. See GSG XXII, 33–34.

power the destroyer feels over what he or she destroys (227). The pleasure in cruelty is another manifestation of this feeling, because through it we can plainly feel the effect of our power on others. Whoever has a great sense of their own power will feel a contempt for everything mediocre and less powerful, and so will believe that their existence is not worthwhile (228).

Another psychological facet of pessimism—the very opposite of its sadism—is its "masochism", or what Simmel calls "pleasure in one's own suffering" (*die Lust am eigenen Leid*) or "wallowing in one's misfortune" (*eigene Schwelgen im Unglück*) (228). This masochism appears as the phenomenon called "*Weltschmerz*" (229). Since this feeling is especially apparent among the youth, Simmel calls it "*eine Kinderkrankheit*". Those who suffer *Weltschmerz*, Simmel says, enjoy the pleasure of pain, though it is a pain that does not hurt them.

There is a lot of arrogance bound up with pessimism, Simmel thinks. The pessimist who judges the worthlessness of all things excepts himself from his own judgment (229). He is like Epimenides the Cretan who judged all Cretans liars. Schopenhauer, the prophet of modern pessimism, was the most arrogant of all writers. Simmel also mentions, without naming him,[9] a composer who held the most pessimistic views but who combined his pessimism with "the most intolerable self-divinization" (230).

Simmel concludes his article with a few reservations and warnings. One cannot say how far pessimism has really spread among the public, he argues. Just because so much is now written and discussed about pessimism, one cannot infer that it is the dominant worldview in the public mind (232). Perhaps the public is concerned more with other issues, which it does not show so openly. It also has to be stressed, Simmel insists, that whatever the psychological causes of pessimism, they decide nothing about its objective worth. Psychological states that we condemn can often result in correct opinions; and the best of motives result in a false doctrine (233). Simmel was warning his reader: nothing said here about the psychology of the pessimist gives us grounds to reject his philosophy. It is a warning that contemporary scholars of pessimism would do well to heed.

8.4 Pessimism in Cultural Perspective

A few years after Simmel published his "Über die Grundfragen" and his "Zur Psychologie des Pessimismus", he published another article on pessimism, his "Zu einer Theorie des Pessimismus", which appeared in the popular weekly

9 Simmel was referring to Richard Wagner.

magazine *Die Zeit* in 1900.[10] Fitting its popular venue, this article discusses the broader cultural context of pessimism. Just for that reason, it is sometimes more revealing about Simmel's general attitude toward pessimism.

There is a natural teleology, Simmel says, which ensures that humankind is on the whole more disposed to optimism than pessimism. The evidence for this teleology is that most people feel and act as if the joys of existence outweigh its pains (543). If they acted on the opposite assumption, then that would undermine the energies they need for the preservation and promotion of their lives. Of course, there are a few individuals who believe that there is more suffering than pleasure in life; but either they have found some other rationale for living than the preponderance of pleasure over pain or their feelings and actions are not consistent with their beliefs. The popularity of optimism over pessimism is that optimism is a useful weapon in the struggle for existence; it helps to keep us going even when the prospects are not good. Adding a pointed political comment, Simmel notes that it is perhaps because of their optimism that the Jews have been able to achieve so much under the difficult circumstances of German life.

This natural optimism has been reflected in traditional cosmology, which placed man in the center of things (544). It seemed as if human happiness were the chief purpose of creation, as if everything were designed for human well-being. But, however flattering, Simmel notes that this cosmology has been in decline ever since Copernicus. The man of modern science has lost his privileged place in the universe, and he now turns out to be one part of nature like all other parts. His body has roughly the same physical and chemical constitution as other natural bodies, and he obeys the same natural laws as all other creatures. In this dehumanized universe, the human desire for happiness plays no determining role; the nature of things is simply indifferent to human suffering.

Although the anthropocentric cosmology has been in decline for centuries, Simmel notes that we have been very slow to adapt to, and to recognize, the consequences (545). Because the older anthropocentric view supports our natural optimism, we still find it difficult to part with it; we still feel and act as if it were true. We still do not know what it means to live in a world with no final causes, no soul and no God. Pessimism is one consequence, Simmel maintains, of this decline in the old cosmology and our failure to live with the new. It has arisen out of a feeling of disappointment and disillusionment: if there is no God, no providence and no soul, then life must be miserable and cannot be worth living. Pessimism and optimism are therefore curious bedfellows: both

10 Georg Simmel, "Zu einer Theorie des Pessimismus", *Die Zeit* 22 (1900) 38–40. GSG, V, 543–551. All references in parentheses are to the *Gesamtausgabe*.

assume that the anthropocentric view of the world is necessary to our happiness; but optimism affirms that view while pessimism denies it.

Pessimism, Simmel maintains, is a transitional philosophy (546–547). It is the philosophy after optimism and before a new more modern philosophy. This more modern philosophy holds a neutral position regarding the question of the value of life. It disagrees with both optimism and pessimism in that it holds that life is neither good nor evil; it is rather simply indifferent, holding that the good or evil of the world is a matter of what we human beings make of it.

So far Simmel has located pessimism in its broad historical context, such that it seems the natural result of the decline in the old anthropocentric worldview. That seems to appreciate pessimism for what it is worth, at least on historical grounds. But in the remarkable second half of his article Simmel turns on pessimism, accusing it of nothing less than "sadism" (*Grausamkeitslust*) (547). This was a reprise of the theme in the "Psychologie des Pessimismus" article. The pessimist's cruelty, Simmel now argues, shows itself in trying to destroy the feelings that give worth to life, or in making people self-conscious of their suffering. In doing these things, the pessimist takes a strange pleasure in destruction. The pessimist's denial of all values is just a *theoretical* form of practical destruction and pillage (548).

8.5 Socialism and Pessimism

It was very characteristic of Simmel's philosophizing that he would consider an issue from many different angles, and that he would constantly approach it anew. He never took what he said at one time as binding for another; if this resulted in inconsistency, it also allowed for a greater understanding and insight into a problem or topic. This aspect of Simmel's philosophizing is fully in display in his next article on pessimism, his "Socialismus und Pessimismus",[11] which was also published in *Die Zeit* in 1900. In this article Simmel is much more sympathetic to pessimism than in his previous articles; it is as if he has now finally discovered the value and point of pessimism.

Simmel begins by questioning yet again the applicability of the pessimist's calculus of pleasure and pain. The idea that there is a correct proportion between pleasure and pain, a balance in which these quantities could be equal, rests on a fallacy, Simmel says (552). No one can say a priori about a certain quantity of pleasure what should be its equivalent in pain. Since pleasure and pain are not homogeneous, they are not really comparable; and because they are not *qualitatively* comparable, they are not *quantitatively* so. Hence the

11 "Socialismus und Pessimismus", *Die Zeit*, 22 (1900), 70–71. GSG V, 552–559. All references in parentheses are to the *Gesamtausgabe*.

pessimist's thesis that, on average, the few pleasures of existence are bought too dearly by its many pains is nonsense (552). We cannot say, therefore, that humans experience too much pain; for the average itself cannot be measured; it cannot be regarded as too much or too little without requiring another measure to measure it (553).

Yet Simmel thinks that the question about the happiness or suffering of humanity has now lost much of its interest (553). The far more urgent and interesting question, he maintains, concerns the *distribution* of happiness. Regardless of the total amount of happiness available for humanity in general, the fundamental problem is how this happiness is distributed among different people. This is where the socialist enters the picture. The socialist maintains that we can significantly increase the sum total of happiness in society through establishing greater economic equality; the masses, who have suffered deprivation for so long, will be made much happier when they see their wealth increase through social legislation. Simmel sees a connection here between pessimism and socialism: the pessimist holds that the value of life increases with the sum of happiness; and the socialist maintains that the value of a person's life increases with a greater share in the distribution of goods (555). This makes socialism seem an antidote to pessimism, because the value of life will increase in direct proportion with the number of people who are happy, and that number will be made much greater through socialism.

Nevertheless, this apparent solution to the problem of pessimism suffers from a serious glitch, Simmel points out (555–556). Although people will be happy at first with attaining a greater level of wealth, they will not be happy for long. For people, Simmel notes, are constantly trying to go beyond the average, to exceed the norm, which the community sets them; they are never satisfied with limits but always want to go beyond them. Although Simmel is not so explicit, he is referring to the classical problem of *pleonexia*,[12] of how all people strive to outdo others and are never satisfied with simple justice, with what is due to them. The competitive striving to get more is therefore a serious problem for socialism.

There is only one way for the socialist to avoid this problem, Simmel argues (556). That is for him to abandon the utilitarian ethic that tells everyone to maximize their happiness in life. Such an ethic is only an encouragement to *pleonexia*, to the competitive striving by which everyone strives to outdo everyone else. Instead, the socialist must adopt the pessimist doctrine which advocates a minimum of pain rather than a maximum of pleasure. According to this doctrine, the best one can achieve in life is freedom from pain. "… this is an approximation to Nirvana, whose serenity consists not in positive

12 See Plato *Republic*, 344a–c.

feelings of pleasure but in a mere nothingness, removed from all feelings of pain…" (556).

Now that he sees the value of the pessimist ethics, Simmel turns around and defends some of the pessimist's central arguments. If you grant the main premise of the pessimist—that life demands extraordinary suffering for its few pleasures—then it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that there is more suffering than happiness in life (557). There is indeed much to support the premise, Simmel finds. The lack of a satisfying and attainable end in life, the triviality of its few pleasures, and the empty striving after illusions, hardly make life worth living (557–558). There is nothing that compensates us for all our toils and troubles. There is also a terrible disproportion between the ego's claims on life and the scarce resources available to satisfy them (558). Once we accept the pessimist's portrait of the normal ego—the "*Hypertrophie des Ichs*", as Simmel calls it—the more we have to accept his account of the suffering of life.

To escape this fate, Simmel says that it is necessary for the ego to accept some limit to its striving. He needs an external limit, a law which defines his rights and obligations. This restraint can come from "the religious circle of ideas", which will give him an element of humility and acceptance of his limits. Simmel does not specify this circle of ideas, but it is clear he was thinking of the Buddhist ethic he earlier suggested.

All in all, it was an extraordinary alliance that Simmel was suggesting: a pessimistic socialism or a socialistic pessimism. He said it was really more the latter than the former because pessimism was really alien to the socialist way of thinking, which was at bottom very optimistic in its beliefs about the goodness of humanism and progress (557). Whatever form one prefers, it is clear that Simmel was willing to grant the pessimist much more credibility than his earlier articles suggest.

8.6 Schopenhauer versus Nietzsche

Simmel's concern with pessimism persisted in a book, which he published in 1906, devoted to its greatest exponent and its greatest opponent, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*.[13] This is still one of the best comparative treatments of the two philosophers. Most of the book is an exposition and critique of Schopenhauer's philosophy, and therefore much of it has a direct bearing on the question of his pessimism.

It is noteworthy that, throughout the book, Simmel treats Schopenhauer with much greater sympathy than Nietzsche. It is inevitable, he thinks, that

13 Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche. Ein Vortragszyklus* (Munich and Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humblot, 1906). All references above are to GSG X, 167–408.

the modern individual will be more receptive to Nietzsche than Schopenhauer (188). Such a reader will not readily accept Schopenhauer's gloomy gospel of the worthlessness of life, and it is more easy for him to approve Nietzsche's cheering idea that there is meaning in existence. Nevertheless, even if Nietzsche is more acceptable, Simmel thinks that Schopenhauer is the greater philosopher. Although he defended the lesser cause, he still did so with greater powers. Simmel prizes Schopenhauer over Nietzsche for another less comprehensible reason: he maintains that Schopenhauer had more of a sense for the "absolute of things", i.e., more of a feeling for the cosmos as a whole (188). He found Schopenhauer's doctrine of the cosmic will "a sublime idea" (317). Why this metaphysical sense should be so important for a philosopher Simmel does not explain.

Simmel makes the most drastic and dramatic contrasts between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Schopenhauer knew only one absolute value: the denial of life; Nietzsche too knew only one absolute value: the affirmation of life (348). For Schopenhauer, all other values—beauty, sanctity, morality—are only means for the denial of life; for Nietzsche, all other values are only a means for the affirmation of life.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche both begin from the premise that life has no meaning beyond itself (179–180). They both deny the traditional Christian view that finds the meaning of life beyond life, in the heavenly realm of eternal salvation. They draw opposing conclusions from this denial, however. For Schopenhauer, it means that life is meaningless; for Nietzsche, it means that the meaning has to be created in life itself (183).

This basic opposition can be characterized further. The goal of life for Nietzsche is *more* life, the *intensification* of life, going beyond the previous stage onto a higher stage of life (181). A development that allows life to realize and fulfill all its forces is *ipso facto* good (182–183). For Schopenhauer, however, *more* life, the *intensification* of life, is not the solution but the problem; this is because life is simply suffering; so going onto a higher state of life only means more intense suffering.

Nietzsche had made the eternal recurrence into a test for the value of life; only he who affirmed the eternal recurrence of the same could truly value life. For Schopenhauer, however, the most horrible of all thoughts is the eternity of being, because this would mean that the horror of life would go on forever (187). What makes the eternity of life especially horrifying for Schopenhauer is that it poses the prospect of eternal ennui (183). "The deepest substance" of Schopenhauer's pessimism Simmel finds not in his portrait of suffering but in his account of the monotony and the utter boredom of life.

Although Simmel admired Schopenhauer as a great metaphysician, he still thought that much of Schopenhauer's reasoning in behalf of pessimism was flawed. One of Schopenhauer's doctrines that he examines very critically is his diagnosis of human suffering in §§ 57–58 of *Die Welt als Wille und*

Vorstellung. The weak point in Schopenhauer's reasoning Simmel finds in his claim that the will, before it attains its goal, suffers from a feeling of deprivation (243). That is not necessarily the case, he argues, because we often take pleasure in anticipating and pursuing our goals. We feel deprivation only if the will's striving is frustrated in some way. Schopenhauer's mistake was to divide the whole process of desire into first chasing after and then achieving one's goal, where chasing it was suffering and where only achieving it is pleasurable; but often the whole process of desire—the moments of anticipation and progress toward the goal—is very pleasant (248).

Simmel notes how Schopenhauer builds his case for pessimism on his hedonic calculus. It has often been objected that the value of life can be assessed by other metrics than pleasure or pain. But Simmel notes that Schopenhauer had a deeper reason for using pleasure (241–242). He was only following his thesis that the appearance of the will takes place first and foremost in the sphere of feeling; hence the metric of value had to be, for metaphysical reasons, pleasure or pain. Nevertheless, Simmel still thinks that there is something problematic in the pessimist's use of the hedonic calculus (252–253). Schopenhauer claims that the pleasures of life are far outweighed by the pains, that we have to pay too high a price for the few pleasures of life because to attain them we have to suffer too much. But how do we determine, Simmel asks, paying too much or too little? We would need some criterion based on how much people normally or on average pay for their pleasures. There is, however, no such criterion (252–253).

Schopenhauer still has another thesis to back up his estimate of the preponderance of suffering over pleasure in life: that all pleasure has only a negative value (243). This would put a null value on the pleasure side of the scale. However, Simmel does not think that Schopenhauer's theory of the purely negative value of pleasure is very plausible; he claims against him that we have a *positive* feeling in the satisfaction of desire. Nor is Simmel impressed by Schopenhauer's thesis that the mere existence of suffering shows that the universe should not exist. The thesis seems utterly arbitrary, he claims. Why not just say the opposite: the mere existence of pleasure, despite all the suffering to attain it, shows that the universe should exist? (255).

One of the problems of Schopenhauer's pessimism for Simmel is that it rides roughshod over the injustice of the world (260). Schopenhauer thinks that because the world is the creation of the will, it is a just world because it is as the will wills (259). Just as our feeling of justice is satisfied if someone wills what happens to them, so we should say the same of the universe as a whole. The will itself is responsible for all the suffering and evil of the world, so there is an eternal justice behind all the suffering and evil of the world. But the problem with this conclusion, Simmel thinks, is that it does not consider the *distribution* of evil and suffering. It is just a fact that some people suffer much more than others; through no fault of their own, they receive much

less of the goods of this life (260). Schopenhauer's cosmic justice does not do away with these injustices.

Simmel's *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* never made a final choice between the two philosophers. The contrast between them was presented in the most dire terms; yet Simmel himself did not decide for one rather than the other. The choice was left to the reader. To be sure, Simmel presented the fallacies in Schopenhauer's arguments for pessimism; but they did not make pessimism false anymore than optimism true. The decision was still left open for the reader. Only toward the very end of his life does Simmel's personal attitude become clear. We must now examine it.

8.7 Life and the Transcendence of Life

Simmel's final word on pessimism is his theory about the nature of life in the first chapter of his last great work, *Lebensanschauung*,[14] which was published in 1918. Now we can finally see where Simmel stood on the great choice between Schopenhauer or Nietzsche.

Life is for Simmel a ceaseless activity of self-creation and self-transcendence. This activity involves the unification of two opposing drives within itself: limitation and the overcoming of limitation. Each drive is necessary for self-creation. The self must limit itself because it must express, embody or objectify its creative energies; to do that, it must give them some specific form; it must make the indeterminate something determinate. But that form or determination eventually acts as a limit on its activity, controlling and restraining it. Hence the self must overcome its self-limitation, it must transcend itself, if it is to continue to be creative. This process never comes to an end because the self constantly strives for new ways of expressing itself; but whatever ways it finds, it will rebel against them and create anew, posing itself with new challenges.

Simmel sometimes describes this process in a paradoxical form: on the one hand, the goal of the self is "*more life*" because it is never satisfied with its *current* restrictions and limitations, which it will always strive to remove and go beyond; but, on the other hand, its goal is "*more than life*" because it rebels against *all* restrictions, against limitations *in general*, which are essential to life.

This paradoxical dual aspiration was Simmel's ultimate reply to pessimism. The fact that the self always wanted more life, and indeed more than life, meant that it was invincible, irrepressible, indefatigable. Schopenhauer regarded the endless striving of life as pointless because the self never moved

14 Georg Simmel, "Die Transcendenz des Lebens", Kap. I of *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1918). GSG XVI, 209–235.

beyond itself; it simply repeated the same process of struggle without learning and growing. Simmel, though, saw the infinite striving of the self as a progression, where it learned and acquired new life. Self-transcendence was his version of *Bildung*, of self-education and inner growth.

Unfortunately, Simmel's concept of self-transcendence was never influential. Yet it took hold of many themes long implicit in German philosophy. The historical ancestors of Simmel's concept were Schlegel's irony and Hegel's spirit; and its more contemporary counterparts were Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming and Dilthey's concept of *Erlebnis*. For all these philosophers, life was a process of self-transcendence. This was for them what made life worth living.

9

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

9.1 Interest in Religion

In 1898 Simmel published an article entitled "Zur Soziologie der Religion",[1] which marks the beginning of his interest in religion. That interest will be the source of many articles and a monograph, which he will publish in the next fourteen years. Religion will be henceforth one of Simmel's major preoccupations, as important to him as aesthetics, metaphysics and ethics. It will become one of the chief sources of his later philosophy of life, the culminating achievement of his career.

But whence this interest in the philosophy of religion? There is no evidence for such an interest before 1898. There are at least no indications in his surviving correspondence. On December 30, 1898, he wrote Wilhelm Schuppe that he was thinking of lecturing on religion in the next semester[2]; and on October 27, 1899 he told Heinrich Rickert that he now, for the first time, lectured on the philosophy of religion, which was, in his "personal opinion", his best course.[3] These letters are strong evidence for Simmel's close engagement with the philosophy of religion; they do not explain, however, why he was interested in it in the first place.

Simmel was not interested in religion because he was attracted to it, because he felt some stirrings of faith in the depths of his soul. At no point in his life was Simmel a believer, whether as a Christian or a Jew. His interest in

1 Georg Simmel, "Zur Soziologie der Religion". *Neue Deutsche Rundschau*, Jahrgang 9, Band I (1898), 111–123. GSG V, 266–286.
2 GSG XXII, 318–319.
3 GSG XXII, 339.

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religion was strictly scientific; he wanted to investigate it because it was an interesting phenomenon.

Simmel must have felt that he had something new to say about the philosophy of religion. The major approaches to the philosophy of religion in the 19th century were no longer an option for him. Simmel had no intention of providing a rational reconstruction of religion along the lines of speculative idealism. By the 1840s, that approach seemed exhausted; Hegel's proofs for the existence of God, for example, had lost all interest and credibility. Still less, though, did Simmel have any interest in contributing to the critique of religion; that approach had been already thoroughly explored by Strauss, Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche. So Simmel saw no future, therefore, in either the rational defense or critique of religion.

There was one striking fact about religion that provoked Simmel's interest and made him want to investigate it: that, despite all the criticism of religion, it still persisted among millions of people as a form of belief and practice. The critique of religion could not have been more thorough, rigorous and convincing. Why, then, had religion not just disappeared? The persistence of religion meant for Simmel that it was not simply a form of intellectual or theoretical belief; people did not hold religious beliefs simply because of the evidence for them, and they did not renounce them just because of the evidence against them.

Religion, Simmel became convinced, was a *form of life*, a *way of living* as necessary to the believer as the commitment to any value or cause. Without that commitment, life would become difficult, indeed impossible. Religion sustained the believer through the traumas, trials and tribulations of life; it gave him hope and strength where nothing else could save him. Because this was the ultimate source of religious belief, the question of its truth or falsity, of the evidence for and against it, became almost irrelevant.

If the persistence of religion, its continuing presence as a form of life, showed that there was no point in criticizing religion, it did establish that there was all the more point in understanding or explaining it. It was precisely here that Simmel believed that he had something to offer to the discussion, for he had a new form of understanding or explanation of religion. This was his sociology, the field that he had been pioneering since the 1890s. Sociology could provide a new explanation of religion by demonstrating its social and cultural causes rather than just its individual or psychological ones. This potentiality was already latent in the *Völkerpsychologie* of his earlier years, since the *Volksgeist* had all the appearances of a secularized form of the divine.

The reason for the persistence of religion, Simmel believed, was its necessity not only for the individual but also for society. What gave sustenance and security to social forms, Simmel believed, was their religious source and sanction. Religion was a form of life not only for the individual alone, but for

the individual in his interactions with others. These interactions were based on moral norms and codes which had their source in religion; they would not have existed at all, if it were not for their religious motivation and inspiration. What confirms the close relationship between religion and society, Simmel argues, is the deep analogy between religious belief and social forms: there is the same relationship of whole to part, of authority to individual, of norm to subject, in religion and society; the religious is only a hypostasized and substantialized form of society; it is society *sub specie aeternitatis*.

We will now follow the highlights of the development of Simmel's views on religion from his earliest writings in 1898 to his last in 1912.

9.2 Sociology of Religion

Simmel's first foray into the philosophy of religion, as already mentioned, came with his article "Zur Soziologie der Religion", which he published in 1898 in the *Neue Deutsche Rundschau*.[4] It was a debut one could expect from a student of *Völkerpsychologie*. Like a true student of Lazarus and Steinthal, Simmel puts religion in its social context and attempts to understand its social origins. The article is not intended as a critique of religion in the manner of Marx and Feuerbach, even though it borrows concepts from that philosophical tradition.

We will never be able to understand the origin and essence of religion, Simmel writes, as long as we think that there is *one* problem with *one* solution (266). There is no single definition of religion which covers all its varieties. There are as many origins and essences of religion as there are religions. No theory of the origin of religion will be justified, therefore, when it attempts to give *the* origin of religion; all that is defensible is when we give a theory about the origin of *one* form of religion. With that caveat in mind, Simmel proceeds to construct his theory about the origin of one form of religion. Although he is not so explicit, it is clear that he is discussing the origin of monotheism.

Simmel searches for the origins of religion in society, which means for him in the relations of people to one another (267). He warns us that the feelings and impulses behind the origins of religion do not appear only in religion; they can be found in all kinds of connections. But there is one kind of feeling and impulse that is specifically religious, we are told. All religiosity contains a mixture of selfless surrender and desire, of humility and elevation, of sensuous immediacy and nonsensuous abstraction; there is an intensity of feeling, an inwardness and determination, the direction of the subject onto a higher order, which it feels at the same time to be inner and personal (269).

4 "Zur Soziologie der Religion", *Neue Deutsche Rundschau* Jahrgang IX, (1898), 111–123. GSG V, 266–286.

Religion originates when some fact from our social life, which originates in our interactions with one another, becomes hypostasized, as if it had an independent existence of its own (274). This becomes clear, Simmel notes, from the fact of faith (*Glaube*). Faith is a fundamental concept of religion, of course, but it originates in our social life. We must have faith in one another if we are to conduct our social life at all. The child has faith in his parent, the subordinate has faith in his superiors, the friend has faith in his friend, the individual has faith in his nation, and the citizen has faith in its government. What happens in religion is this feeling is separated from its social phenomena and represented purely and abstractly on its own (275). This feeling takes on a life of its own when it is considered as a force by itself, independent of its particular social embodiments (276).

Another fact of our social life, which is transformed through religion, is expressed in the concept of unity (276). We strive for unity in many aspects of our social life. We need unity to understand the manifold of sense impressions that appear before us. But we also need unity to organize ourselves socially, when we form organizations and groups to achieve common ends. This unity of things, when we abstract it from the particular groups that instantiate it, finds its purest form in the idea of the divine (277).

Simmel expresses his theory in its clearest and most general form when he writes: "religion consists in social forms of relation, separated from their empirical content, and reified (*verselbständigt*) and projected into substances" (279). Alternatively: "One could say… that religion depicts as substance—that it substantializes—that which regulates the form and function of group life" (280).

Simmel does not use the specific terms "reification" or "hypostasization"; but the word he uses amounts (substantialize) to the same concept.[5] Such a concept was fundamental in Feuerbach's critique of religion. Simmel, however, treats reification as a psychological phenomenon, and does not regard it as a philosophical fallacy. His treatment of this phenomenon differs from Feuerbach's in a significant manner: he insists that what gives content to religious representations is not individual or moral properties but social forms (278). This social aspect is missing in Feuerbach.

Simmel insists that his investigation of the origins of religion is not meant as a critique of religion (285). He wants to exclude "every question of the objective truth of religion". It is a mistake to think that the merits of an ideal, or the dignity of a feeling, is tarnished if we explain its origins. This is like

5 Thus Simmel writes how social forms are "*verselbständigt und auf eigene Substanzen projizirt werden*" (279); he writes about the "*Verselbständigung*" of these forms and their "*Beziehung auf ein außerhalf stehendes Wesen*" (284); and he describes the idea of God as "*die Vollkommenheit in die Substanz vorgestellt*" (283).

thinking human dignity is destroyed if we explain the origins of humanity from the apes. The strength of religious feeling shows its depth and dignity beyond all questions of its origins (286). In almost all his writings on religion, Simmel is anxious to distinguish the explanation of its origins from criticism; in this respect, he distinguishes himself from both Feuerbach and Nietzsche.

9.3 The Fantasies of a Theist

At the end of the 1890s, Simmel liked to write occasional short pieces for the journal *Jugend*. These usually were "little stories with a thoughtful background", as Hans Simmel characterized them. One of these pieces, which bears the date 23.7.1898, has a religious content: "Theistiche Phantasien eines Fin-de-siècclisten".[6] Some of its themes reappear in Simmel's more serious academic writings.

The article consists of four stories or parables. Their interpretation is best left to the reader.

The first story invites us to consider God as absolute spirit, as the highest and purest consciousness (371). But if God reveals himself in human beings, so that they become more spiritual, does that not mean that God dissolves himself in individual spirits? The divine spirit will then depart from the whole of being to embody itself in human spirits. That means that the whole of the world will become less divine. There will no longer be dryads in the forests or nymphs in the streams; the world will be abandoned by God, who has dissipated himself. While we humans become more perfect spirits, the soul of the world will disappear.

The second story is a parable which tells us about a meeting between God and the devil (371–372). God asks the devil, who has done a favor for him, what he requires in recompense. The devil demands that God take away human happiness. God promises he will do as requested. When the devil returns to earth, he finds that people are living in peace and harmony; there is no envy, no jealousy, no anxiety; for happiness, which was the reward for struggle, has been abolished by God. Distraught, the devil begs that God restore happiness on earth.

The third story tells us that the life of a culture comes from the constant oscillations to and away from its God, just like the power of faith pulsates between a closer and more distant attitude toward God (372). Voltaire said that if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him; that is true of the oscillations *toward* God. But of the oscillations *away* from him, one should say just the opposite: even if God exists, it would be necessary to deny him!

6 "Theistische Phantasien eines Fin-de-siècclisten", GSG XVII, 371–374.

The last parable is a reflection on equality before the law (373–374). Before God, we are all equal. God's law knows no standing of persons. But what about himself? The demands and ideals by which he governs our lives do not stop before his throne, not when the goodness and wisdom of rulers comes from them not excepting themselves from the rules they impose on others. And did not God, in sacrificing his son to redeem humanity, not subject himself to the law of expiation and revenge?

If God ordered our feeling and willing in an infinite chain of means and ends, so that everything had its meaning from the higher purpose above it, what would happen when this chain reached the divine being? If it does not fall outside the chain, there must be something above it on which its worth depends. But it is impossible to think of something higher than God. So perhaps God finds in the inclination toward the world what cannot be found above it? Perhaps in the being of the world, God finds the goal of his being just as the world finds its goal of being in God. Then the chain of means and ends closes within itself and finds its infinitude in the endlessness of a ring. Thus there will be equality before the law, when God makes the law for the world and the world makes the law for God.

9.4 Epistemology of Religion

Simmel's next article on the philosophy of religion was his most epistemological, his "Beiträge zur Erkenntnistheorie der Religion", which appeared in 1901 for the *Zeitschrift fur Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*.[7] This article is a good introduction to Simmel's philosophy of religion. It reveals some of the defining traits of Simmel's attitude toward religion: it is not a critique but an interpretation of what is characteristic of the religious attitude. Its stance is not critical but hermeneutical. It is not about the reduction of religion to "the human all too human", as Nietzsche would have it, but "the elevation of earthly feelings into its sphere" (14).

Simmel begins with the bald statement that religion is "nothing more than an occurrence in human consciousness" (9). This means *inter alia* that religion should not be defined as a relation between God and the soul. For even if God did not exist, Simmel argues, there would still be religion, which would then consist in "the subjective attitude of the human being". Religion therefore consists in "a human feeling, belief, action…which makes up our part in the relation between us and God". Simmel insists on this subjective definition of religion because only this side of religion is "given to us" and therefore it alone is the subject of "scientific analysis" (9). Whether the

7 Georg Simmel, "Beiträge zur Erkenntnistheorie der Religion", *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik,* Band 119, Heft 1, (1901), 11–22. GSG VII, 9–20.

contents of religion, its various objects of belief, are true, is not a matter of its definition. Whether God created the world, whether he provides redemption or sanctification, whether he rules the world with justice—this is not necessary to the definition of religion, even though it belongs to the content of religion (10).

Simmel thinks that the distinction between the content of a belief and the attitude toward it should be applied to religion itself (10). There can be different attitudes toward one and the same content where each attitude gives a different meaning to the content. Religion can be described as one kind of attitude or form toward this content. This attitude or form would be "a unified mood of the soul" which gives a specific meaning to the content; it would consist in "a complex of different ingredients of feeling", viz., such as the surrender and regaining of the soul, humble modesty and passionate desire, and unity with and distance from the one (11). Just as in external-practical affairs one and the same object can circulate through different spheres of interest, so in religion one and the same object can be characterized by different attitudes. Simmel thinks that, though it can be described in many different ways, there is one and the same basic attitude involved in religion. He provides no definition or description of this attitude.

From this basic distinction, Simmel draws four important conclusions. First, that religion, as one attitude toward the content, stands on the same level as the categories of being, ought, willing, and so on (11–12). Hence the value of religion should not be judged according to those categories but should be seen as coordinate to them. Religion and these categories relate to one another like the attributes of cognition and extension in Spinoza: each expresses all being in its own manner but none is equivalent to any other. Second, that the attitude toward the content can still be the same even though the content undergoes change. Third, the religious attitude does not make one content, or religion in general, logically necessary. Fourth, the religious attitude need not be stuck to transcendent objects; it can also relate to earthly things (13).

None of these points about the attitude of religion, Simmel argues, justify the belief in the *existence* of the object of religion (12–13). The feeling or concept of being does not let us press any concrete content out of it, which, he says, must flow from some other source (12). All attempts to prove the existence of God logically, or to demonstrate the necessity of God from being, have their counterpart in the dogmatic attempts to claim only one content as religious (13).

In the second section of his article, Simmel argues that there is a separation of religious belief from the theoretical (14). In other words, religious belief is not intellectual, depending solely on sources of evidence for or against it. Belief in the existence of God is not, therefore, like a belief in the aether or the atomic structure of matter. Religious belief is a state of the human soul,

signifying something about this state as a fact; it is not a mere theoretical reflection of this fact (17). The belief in God is therefore a kind of *inner* existence. What distinguishes us as believers is not some difference in content, or *what* we believe in, but a difference in the inner state of the soul, *that* and *how* we believe in something (17).

In knowledge, the interest lies not in the *activity of the soul* which holds the belief but in the *content* of the belief. The content of belief might change or be different; but the person who holds the belief will be the same. In faith, however, there is no such independence of content and belief: belief in a different God is a different kind of belief (18). This is like many other attitudes: when love changes from one object to another, it becomes a different love. Whether one believes in Jehova, the Christian God, or Ormuzd and Ahriman, is not only a difference in object but also a difference in faith, because it means a different way of being human (18).

Kant was the first philosopher to appreciate the dimension of faith as an inner state of the soul, Simmel says. He placed the source of faith in the practical dimension of morality; the origin and intention of faith did not lie, therefore, in the intellectual realm. Still, Kant never fully succeeded in separating faith from the intellectual. Faith remained intellectual with him, even if its starting point was not intellectual. Faith in Kant was still intellectual because it rested on two different inferences: first, that faith in the highest good required belief in its possible realization; second, that this realization required a transcendent God and belief in his justice (15).

9.5 On Pantheism

In August 1902, Simmel published in the liberal magazine *Das Freie Wort* his article "Vom Pantheismus".[8] Simmel's attitude toward pantheism is important in locating his attitude toward other liberal and radical currents of his time. Pantheism had been the religion of the intellectuals in Germany since the 18th century. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi had famously declared that all rationalism ends in pantheism. The intellectual leaders of the *Neues Deutschland* movement of the 1830s—Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Börne and David Friedrich Strauss—adopted pantheism as their radical faith. Pantheism was appealing to them because it stood for egalitarianism and naturalism—for the equality of all human beings in God and for a scientific understanding of nature. But the advent of materialism in the 1840s and 1850s meant that pantheism had ceased to be fashionable. "Pantheism is the negation of

8 Georg Simmel, "Vom Pantheismus", *Das Freie Wort. Frankfurter Halbmonatsschrift für Fortschritt aus allen Gebieten des geistigen Lebens.* Jahrgang 2 (1902/03) 306–12. GSG VII, 84–91.

theology from the standpoint of theology",[9] Feuerbach said, and many of the new generation agreed.

So when Simmel wrote about pantheism in 1902, he had a long and rich tradition behind him. While neither a pantheist nor a materialist himself, he still wanted to understand the meaning of pantheism, what was of enduring value in its attitude toward religion.

Simmel begins his essay by postulating a principle that seems the very opposite of pantheism. He states that the form of things, and our relation to them, appear to obey one fundamental principle: that *difference* must rule between things, that they must stand against one another and have a separate identity (84). This same principle governs the relations between people: what arouses our activity, produces our feelings, determines our relations to one another, is our differences from one another. The characteristic for-itself-ness of each person, that with which it opposes every other person, is the source of love and hate. We stand opposed to the whole of being—whether in its mechanism or in its the divinity—because the meaning of life is to give and take, which involves difference and opposition between things. Without an ineradicable difference of all things to one another, and all souls to one another, life is unthinkable.

This principle, precisely because it is so pervasive and engrained, provokes our opposition against it, Simmel says (84). We have a longing for its opposite: the desire to be one with all things. We feel loneliness and poverty, coldness and incomprehension, as long as we feel a separation from all things, a feeling which becomes unbearable to us. And so, with open arms, we collapse into the heart of being, to feel our unity with it. As long as we were different from it, as long as it stood apart from us, this being was not *our* God, Simmel says (85).

This feeling, when it is crystallized into a religion or philosophy, is what we call *pantheism*. It means, as Simmel explains it, that God and the world are not opposed to one another but both are one infinite being (85). Every serious concept of God, he declares, must insist on its inseparability from the world. For all independence of things involves a negation, which sets a limit to God's power, which should know no limit. Since God is omnipotent and everything takes place through his will, there can be nothing outside it, and it is the being and becoming of all things (85–86). It is only our blindness and anthropomorphism when we think that God is the source of only the goodness of things; if *one* point of existence is the appearance of its will, *all* points are also the appearance of its will. The strict lawful connection of the

9 Ludwig Feuerbach, "Vorläufige Thesen zur Reformation der Philosophie", in *Werke in sechs Bänden,* ed. Erich Thiess (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), III, 224.

cosmos on the one hand, and the unity of God on the other hand, forbid their separation into different provinces (86).

But there is a problem with pantheism, Simmel says (86). When it is thought through to its ultimate conclusion, the concept of God seems to be the one-and-all, having no limits to its existence. But this conclusion undermines one of the presuppositions of the concept of God: its infinite power. Power, when it has no limit or obstacle, when it has nothing to struggle against it, cannot exercise itself. The concept of power loses all meaning when there is nothing to resist it. God has the most power when it overcomes the greatest resistance; but then God cannot be everything, because there must be something outside God to resist it. A God who destroyed the independence of the world would simply have no power (87).

The same problem recurs for the pantheistic feeling for God. The deeper we sink into God, the more we surrender ourselves to it, the more we lose the possibility of giving to God and taking from God, which assumes some difference between ourselves and God (89). But without this giving and taking we lose all feeling for God.

Christianity had the germ of a solution to this dilemma of pantheism, Simmel says (90). It found it in the concept of love, which expresses the ideal of unity-in-difference. For love is the struggle of separate beings against separation, a struggle that can never achieve its unity with the other. This is "the self-contradiction of all love". The principle of the love toward God found a way to bring together the Judaic separation of God from the world with the pantheistic union of God with the world. But Simmel insists that this is not a reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) of these principles, which still stand and should stand in conflict with one another (90). Love means that we will constantly strive to be in unity with the world, but also that we need this world to resist our striving and to give it meaning.

Simmel's advocacy of both the moments of unity and difference in the experience of the divine will become a major theme of his philosophy of religion. The same theme will re-emerge in his final work, *Lebensanschauung*.

9.6 On Salvation

Also in 1902, Simmel wrote another article for *Das freie Wort*, this time an analysis of the classic religious concept of salvation, "Vom Heil der Seele".[10] Simmel gives a very sympathetic interpretation of this concept, one which would be attractive to a modern reader. But his analysis also reveals the chief weakness of his philosophy of religion: it is unhistorical, failing to explain

10 Georg Simmel: "Vom Heil der Seele", *Das freie Wort, Frankfurter Halbmonatsschrift für Fortschritt aus allen Gebieten des geistigen Lebens,* Jahrgang 2, Nr. 17 (1902), 533–538.

what salvation really meant to an important part of the Christian tradition, namely, the Protestant tradition. What Simmel saw as salvation, Augustine, Luther and Calvin would have seen as damnation. This shows the weakness of his method of a priori conceptual analysis when applied to religious tradition.

Simmel begins his essay with an encomium of religion. It is one of the great achievements of religion, he says, that it forms concepts which are not abstract, like philosophical concepts, but which have the full vivacity and inner comprehensibility of the intuition of immediate existence (109). Simmel gives these examples of such concepts: *God*, which is the highest reality, which lives above yet in all things; *sanctification*, which is the perfection of moral striving, beyond attainment through individual actions yet not a pale abstraction like so many moral ideals; and *eternal life*, which is the unification and perfection of all values and powers of our fragmentary existence, which is not a conceptual schema like the Platonic idea but a reality felt in its immediate unity with our most personal existence. Among these concepts, Simmel says, is the *salvation of the soul*, which is to be distinguished from santification and its immortality. Salvation is the satisfaction of the ultimate longings of the soul, especially its moral longing for blessedness, which is perfection in all its height and power. Salvation refers to something completely inward, so that the question whether the soul finds its salvation in the earthly body or in a heavenly beyond is indifferent (110).

One of the ideas contained within the scope of salvation seems especially significant for Simmel. This is the idea that the self who attains salvation realizes only what is already within itself, so that nothing new comes into the soul. In other words, in every person there rests the ideal of himself, the pure form of what he or she should be (110). The salvation of the soul takes place when the most inner part of the soul is freed from its cover and limits; the soul does not have to take on anything new but only has to throw off its mask to be what it already is (111).

There is a feeling of freedom bound up with salvation, Simmel writes. A person is free to the extent that the center of his being determines its periphery, i.e., to the degree that its thoughts, decisions and actions express itself, undeflected by any powers outside itself. The idea of salvation in Christianity, Simmel says, expresses the idea of the liberation of the soul from everything that is not itself (112). Any salvation comes from some external source, a command or power, is a form of coercion, and therefore contrary to the inner soul.

Simmel makes the most individual, the most distinctive part of the soul into the source of its salvation (113). He asks, however, how this is compatible with the Christian doctrine that salvation is available to everyone. This doctrine seems to value not diversity and individuality but uniformity and universality. Simmel fears that the doctrine of universal salvation has led

to a kind of conformity and uniformity in Christianity. He does not deny universal salvation at all; but he insists that it must come from everyone in his or her own unique way. Jesus indicated that he valued human diversity, Simmel says, but he never doubted its final result for everyone (114). There is no general recipe for how we all attain salvation; every individual has to go his or her own way (114).

Simmel thinks that the search for salvation still persists in the present (114–115). In searching for norms in the realms of law and morality, what we are looking for is the universal that is also individual, for the general type that also contains the incomparability of the individual. We are seeking a synthesis for the most comprehensive universal demand for humanity with the most distinctive in the individual. This is another respect how modern life, in an instinctive way, still has a feeling for religion.

Though Simmel's attempt to find meaning and relevance in an ancient religious concept of salvation is admirable, it has to be said that it suffers from a basic flaw. Simmel reads into the concept of salvation what he thinks *ought to be* read into it, so that his concept of salvation sounds very much like the romantic concept of individuality. But this is entirely unhistorical. The Christian interpretation of salvation, as it was understood in the Augustinian and Protestant traditions, understood salvation as the product of grace alone, which did not come from within human nature but from outside it through divine intervention. In the terms of that tradition, Simmel's concept of grace would be Pelagian or even Socinian, not leaving sufficient allowance for the presence of sin.

9.7 Love and God

One of Simmel's most remarkable attempts to define the place of religion in human life is his "Die Gegensätze des Lebens und die Religion", which he published in 1904 in *Das freie Wort*.[11] This article continues the reflections Simmel began in "Vom Pantheismus", focusing upon the same theme: how is God both the unity and differences between things.

Simmel begins by citing a theme of Nicolaus Cusanus: *Coincidentia oppositorum*, the coincidence of opposites, the unity of the divided. He understands this theme as follows: what the world divides into an infinite multiplicity, God encloses into a unity (295). This unity is indemonstrable for the understanding, Simmel notes, but it needs no demonstration because it is a feeling, the feeling for how the soul relates to existence. This theme of

11 Georg Simmel, "Die Gegensätze des Lebens und die Religion", *Das Freie Wort. Frankfurter Halbmonatsschrift für Fortschritt aus allen Gebieten des geistigen Lebens*, Jahrgang 4 (1904), 305–312. GSG VII, 295–303.

unity in multiplicity is the meaning of all mysticism, Simmel says. Mysticism claims that behind the multiplicity of appearances one can *feel* the unity of being. To go from the unbearable multiplicity of things to their healing unity our soul is the only bridge.

However, the unification of things is only one function of religion; it is indeed secondary compared to its other even more important function: the reconciliation of opposites (295). It would be only one-sided for religion to be based upon only one opposite, or on only one feeling: hope over despair, love over doubt, passion over repose, humility over pride. The sense for religion is to give equal space for *all* feelings, however opposed they seem to be; religion grasps all feelings as a unity, making them all functions of a single organism. Their opposition betrays their deeper unity as complementary functions of one life (296). Here Simmel stresses the indispensable role of opposition for the unity of life, just as in "Vom Pantheismus" he emphasizes the necessity of resistance to divine power.

There is one feeling, Simmel writes, that especially exemplifies the role of opposition in spiritual life: love (297). Love, as Plato said in the *Symposium*, is an infinite longing which stands between having and not-having. It is a having because it is "a finitely certain possession"; but it is also a not-having because it is a possession that must be "earned again with tireless exertion" (298). Love is a contradiction, Simmel writes, because it unites in one feeling "the most extreme longing for possession" with "the most extreme enjoyment in possession" (298). Even in its pleasure, a longing abides that one cannot fulfill. Love is an infinite longing because, however closer one approaches the beloved, it always entices us to go further.

Simmel sees it as perfectly appropriate that we name the ideal of love God (298). God then signifies that ideal where all opposites are united and reconciled; but, Simmel stresses, this is a goal which we cannot ever achieve and which we can only approach through an infinite striving (303).

It is important, Simmel teaches, that we do not grasp love as only a spiritual or intellectual power of the soul. Love unites and reconciles the spirit with the flesh. It is a sublimation and spiritualization of all the powers of feeling and desire in the soul, which give it its energy and force (300). It is therefore a terrible mistake if we reduce religion down to morals, Simmel argues, because this would repress one part of our nature (the flesh) to the advantage of another (the spirit or conscience). Religion is about more than morals; it is about the salvation of our entire nature, flesh and spirit, in a harmonious whole.

A human being needs religion, Simmel writes, to reconcile need and its satisfaction, obligation and deed, ideal and reality (302). But it must never rest with this reconciliation; it must continue to struggle, to create antagonism and to reconcile it again. The reconciling tribunal should not be in rest above all opposition but it should continue to create and work through opposition

(303). Redemption and reconciliation do not lie beyond all opposition but live only in and through it.

Although Simmel writes of God in this article, he still does not abandon his immanent or this-worldly attitude toward religion. God is brought into the world as the activity of love, as the reconciling of oppositions within life. This activity goes beyond opposition at any one stage, of course, but it never goes beyond all the opposition characteristic of life. It is only because it stays within this sphere of opposition that it has its dynamic, reconciling nature.

9.8 The Need for Religion

One of Simmel's most difficult and dense essays on religion is "Ein Problem der Religionsphilosophie", which he published in 1905 for the *Vossische Zeitung*.[12] Here he attempts to make sense of one of the most puzzling concepts of religion: the personality of God. The article continues with the reflections in "Vom Pantheismus", where Simmel attempts to describe both unity with and separation from God.

Simmel begins his essay by acknowledging the great puzzle religion presents to the modern atheistic individual (310). He is convinced that we are caught in the world of experience, and that we cannot transcend this world by any means of knowledge, faith or feeling. We can no more leave this world than we can reach beyond our own hands. Yet he also sees that people of great intellect and experience believe in the existence of a transcendent world; he must then think that he is missing something, that others have a sense for something which he lacks.

Simmel's response to this individual is that the core of religion does not lie in any of its doctrines but in what lies "underneath" them (311). There are powers and needs of the soul that express and satisfy themselves in religion; these appear in its complex of dogmas; but these powers and needs survive the most destructive critique of this complex, like a tree survives after one plucks its fruit of one season. What brings forth religion, Simmel argues, cannot itself be religion in the sense of some faith; rather, it is a drive and movement in the soul that lies deep in human nature. The question of the truth or falsity of a faith does not affect these drives and needs; for they are simply *facts* of human nature, not propositions which are either true or false. Among these needs: the wholeness of our fragmentary existence; the reconciliation of contradictions in and among human beings; a stable point amid all the changes of life; unity in all the confusing manifoldness of life; an

12 Georg Simmel, "Ein Problem der Religionsphilosophie", *Vossische Zeitung,* Nr. 179, Morgenausgabe vom 15 April 1905, Feuilleton-Teil. GSG VII, 310–320.

absolute object for our humility and happiness. These needs nourish transcendent representation; the hunger of the human being is their food (312).

A person of faith does not concern himself with the theoretical possibility or impossibility of these needs (312). He is concerned only that his faith gives expression to them, that his longing finds fulfillment in them. That the dogmas stemming from them are true is only a secondary interest. It is essential only that these needs are felt and thought, that the content of the beliefs expresses them in all their intensity.

Having explained how the content of religious representations arises from these needs, Simmel wants to show the origin of one representation specifically: the personality of God (312). The Enlightenment has raged against this representation, regarding it as an anthropomorphic image of God. But Simmel thinks that this representation has a legitimacy stemming from the deep needs behind the feelings that give rise to it.

What, then, Simmel asks, do we mean by "personality"? First of all, the unity of the properties, powers and events that form its inner life (312). All impersonal existence shows only a coexistence of traits; only in a physical organisms do they grow to a kind of unity. The soul weaves together all of its energies so that they are in incessant interaction; it determines its present through its whole past; and it penetrates every individual content with the consciousness that it is part of the whole which has its meaning beyond this individual (313). But, amid the plentitude of all the representations and strivings of the world, this unity is impossible to achieve. There is simply too much to integrate, too much to unify. A human being is not a whole world itself but only a member of the world; it has to live in constant endomorphis and exomorphis with the world itself. This means that the human being is only an *imperfect* personality, an *incomplete* organism (313). An organism demands that every part live for the whole, and that the whole lives for every part; the personality is only an epitome of such physical organization. But such an organism is only an ideal for us, one which we must strive forever to attain.

There is only one complete organism, one perfect unity, Simmel insists, and that is the whole of being (313). For that whole has nothing outside it for it to depend upon; and it cannot act on anything outside itself, for everything exists within it. The personality of God is nothing less than this character of all being (314). We feel what is accessible to us is only a piece of this unity. Because we are only a part of it, we feel a longing to be the whole, to achieve the complete self-sufficiency and interchange of all elements. To attribute personality to God, Simmel argues, is by no means to anthropomorphize him, to make God in our image, as the Enlightenment describes it (314). Rather, it is the very opposite: it is the completion of ourselves, to make ourselves whole through the personality of God. We do not reduce God down to ourselves; instead, we expand ourselves toward God.

Simmel describes a double relationship between the personality of God and all individuals (315–316). On the one hand, God forms the unity of all these individuals, through whom they become whole; on the other hand, the individual separates itself from this unity, which it feels as something beyond and outside itself. God lives in all individuals and surrenders itself to them; and yet at the same time it has a center in itself not exhausted in these individuals; the problem of personality is to unify these two aspects of itself (316).

Simmel thinks that this double relationship is characteristic of monotheism (316). In the purer forms of monotheism, he says, God is the holder (*Träger*) of all existence; his will lives through the whole world process; and it is in the heart of each individual. But at the same time, God is a self-sufficient being, a self-enclosed unity not exhausted by any of its products or even by their whole sum.

This is where a second aspect of the concept of personality is relevant (317). Personality is not only the unity of its elements but also the withdrawal (*Abhebung*) from them. In its general sense personality is not only where there is a whole uniting all its parts, but where a part opposes itself to the whole in which it is also contained (318). Human beings feel a double need toward their God: they want to belong to something higher, of which they are only a part; but they also want to be independent (319). There is where Schleiermacher got it wrong, Simmel says, when he described religion as the feeling of dependence; there is also the feeling or need for independence. The personality of God involves this double need, for both dependence and independence.

9.9 Religion as a Way of Life

Simmel's most extensive reflections on religion appear in the short monograph *Die Religion*, which first appeared in October 1906.[13] This work incorporates much of the content of his earlier articles on religion, especially "Zur Soziologie der Religion", "Beiträge zur Erkenntnistheorie der Religion", "Vom Pantheismus", "Vom Heil der Seele" and "Die Gegensätze des Lebens und die Religion". The exposition of *Die Religion* is often clearer and more straightforward than the earlier articles, however, so it is worthwhile to take it into account in considering Simmel's philosophy of religion.

Simmel begins *Die Religion* with some reflections on the plurality of worlds (43–44). For the naïve person, reality (*Wirklichkeit*) is the world of experience and practice. The real world for him is the world one senses and

13 *Die Religion* appeared as the second volume of the series *Die Gesellschaft. Sammlung Sozialpsychologisher Monographien* (Frankfurt: Literarischen Anstalt Rütten & Loening, 1906). The series was edited by Martin Buber. *Die Religion* appears in GSG X, 39–118.

acts upon. But this reality is only one of the forms in which we order content; it is not *the* world but only *one* world; it is one world next to the worlds of art, science and religion. All these worlds have the same content; but they have it in different forms, which bring it together according to different presuppositions.

We regard the world of experience and practice as reality because it promotes our psycho-biological organization, or because it is necessary to achieve our ends (44). For other beings, who are organized differently biologically and psychologically, there would be a different world. Hence it is our purposes and presuppositions which determines the world we live in; and the real world is only one of many possible.

One could speak of the special logic, of the specific concept of truth, of the characteristic laws and values, of the art world. One could with the same right, Simmel says, speak of the religious world. The religious world has its own logic, concept of truth, laws and values (45). The religious person has no concern with the possibility or impossibility of his faith; he does not hold that his dogmas are true in the sense of a scientific proposition or a practical experience; that is only a secondary consideration for him (46). What is important for the religious person is that his faith is thought, felt and acted upon, that it is an expression of the intensity of the feeling and action that has led to it.

Religion is for Simmel above all a way of *life*. A religious person *lives* in a specific way, directs and organizes his energies and feelings in a certain way, and he does so in a way which differs from the theoretical, practical and artistic person (47). Just as the understanding orders the content of experience according to its a priori categories, so the religious person must form the content of his life according to his own characteristic categories. Among these categories are sin and redemption, surrender and self-assertion, love and faith (48–49).

Nothing better reveals the social dimension of religion, Simmel thinks, than the remarkable analogy between the relation of the individual to God and the relation of the individual to society (59–60). In both relations, there is a feeling of dependence. The individual feels bound to something universal and higher, from which it flows and into which it flows, to which it surrenders but from which it expects aid and security; it is both different from and identical with this whole. In both relations, the individual is encompassed by a whole having superior power to it; but this whole also gives some freedom to the individual. There is a surrender to the whole, which does not exclude rebellion; there is a giving and receiving from the whole to the part and the part to the whole. The individual feels a humility and gratitude toward the whole, which gives it its existence and identity. Simmel concludes:

> And so there is the same shape in the religious and sociological form of existence of the individual. The social form needs only to be accompanied

> or accepted by the religious mood to result in the essential form of religion as an independent structure and attitude.
>
> *(61)*

The analogy between religion and society is especially clear, Simmel maintains, with the concept of unity (77). The unity of society is symbolized and absolutized in the unity of God. The synthesis of the group is the prototype for the felt or conscious unity which is sublimated through religion in the concept of the unity of God, which holds together all existence (78). God is the name for sociological unity insofar as that unity is felt *sub specie religionis* (79). The concept of God provides the group with a powerful religious sanction, which demands that the individual think first and foremost for the group to which he or she belongs (80–81). The sanction consists in nothing less than salvation, which would be achieved through the unity of the church, which symbolizes the city of god (80). In ancient Judaism, God represents the unity of the group insofar as he is the king of the tribe, indeed the chief member of the community (84). Early forms of religion show how the inter-individual forms of social life give content to religious representations (85).

The idea of the "kingdom of God" (*Reich Gottes*), which unifies the difference between souls, is the unity of existence itself (104). How, Simmel asks, are we to conceive this unity? We can understand it pantheistically, so that God is the unity of all things with one another with no difference between them. But this God of pantheism is not the God of religion, Simmel says, because it lacks the idea of something different from oneself which is essential for the religious mood (105). Love and alienation, suffering and abandonment, intimacy and distance, which are essential relations for religion, would disappear if God were absolutely one. To maintain this difference between religion and its object, we must conceive God not as the absolute identity of things but as the unity of difference, the oneness of interaction (105). God, thought as the unity of existence, is the bearer of this interconnection, or this interaction, between things. It is only in this sense of unity, Simmel argues, that there can be an object for religion.

There is an apparent counterexample to Simmel's thesis about the social dimension of religion: Buddhism. Simmel notes that there is no social element to Buddhism (63). The Buddhist's ideal is ascetic; he preaches complete withdrawal from the social world; he finds redemption in cutting off all ties to existence, whether natural or social. The salvation from suffering, which is the main ethical content of Buddhism, requires no transcendent power, no grace, and no mediator; it comes only with the individual's denial of the will to live. But Simmel disarms this counterexample with a verbal maneuver. Buddhism, he claims, is simply not a religion (63). There is no correlation between the religious and social in this case, Simmel acknowledges, but then he adds that is because there is no social aspect at all. Buddhism is a doctrine of salvation

which depends on the will and attitude of the individual alone (63). Simmel's attitude toward Buddhism shows the remarkable extent to which his theory of religion is formulated around monotheism, whether in its Jewish, Muslim or Christian versions.

In *Die Religion* Simmel is much clearer about the relationship between religion and its object (67–68). Now it is definite to him that this object need not be a transcendent entity, a pre-existing thing which stands apart from and prior to the faith of the religious person. The whole question of the existence of some entity to answer to the believer's faith is laid aside as irrelevant. A person who is loved stands in a new category of being than a person who is not loved at all. The person who is loved is a product of love, no matter whatever other qualities he possesses in the mind of the lover, whether they are real or purely imaginary. The efficacy of fundamental powers and impulses is such, Simmel remarks, that they create their own object (67). The referents of the functions of love, art and religion are made by these functions themselves. These functions have a content, of course, which is independent of them; but they make this content their own, putting it into their own world. It is indifferent to them whether the content, in the form given to them, preexists. What matters is that the content reflects their attitudes and values. Whether there is some transcendent entity answering to the content—whether there is something in existence referred to by their attitudes and values—that, Simmel writes, is a question which must remain undecided (68).

9.10 Response to an Inquiry

In February 1909, Simmel received an inquiry from the journal *Nord und Süd*, from the young editor Curt Radlauer, asking for his opinion on the relationship between modern science and religious belief. The enquiry was entitled "Religiöse Grundgedanken und moderne Wissenschaft".[14] Simmel was among twenty-two intellectuals asked for their opinion; his response was placed in the very beginning of the March 1909 issue. Simmel's reply to the inquiry contains no surprises; but it is especially clear in how it expounds the issues and his attitude. Simmel's basic agnosticism appears firmly and clearly.

The difficulty of the present religious situation, Simmel writes, comes from the tension between religiosity, as the inner being and need of the believer, and all the traditional representations which claim to satisfy this inner need and being (71). That the dogmatic content of religion has fallen into disbelief is not the fault of the sciences (understood as the methodical, exact investigation of facts and possibilities). That a child is born from a virgin, that water is

14 "Religiöse Grundgedanken und moderne Wissenschaft", *Nord und Süd*. Jahrgang 33, Band 128 (1909), 366–369. GSG XVII, 74–78.

transformed from water into wine, that the dead resurrect and go to heaven—that is no less plausible from modern natural science than it has been since the 13th century. The implausibility of these dogmas came about not from particular scientific discoveries but from the general scientific-intellectual climate of the time. When history teaches us that the virgin birth, the mystery of the mass, and the resurrection of the dead are ancient ethnic representations, this does not destroy the subjective, not even the objective meaning of these traditions. For nothing prevents these representations from having a greater transcendent meaning, just as the same ordinary words can sometimes express, with a few small changes, an infinitely meaningful thought.

It has been long since recognized that the concept of God cannot be attacked by science. That the whole complex of existence, of which we know only the relations between some of its parts, has been created and formed by a comprehensive cause is not refutable; but it is also not touched by the sphere of interest of natural science. Apart from a few details, which do not concern the core of Christianity, a logically decisive refutation of religious traditions through the results of the exact sciences is not to be expected. Nevertheless, the scientific mentality in general—the application of science to the hitherto underinvestigated, the limitation of believable reality to the scientifically probable—excludes stubborn adherence to traditional religious content.

It would be very confused, however, to regard the inner needs of religion to be extinguished with the traditional content. They can only be silenced or distracted for a very short time; our historical knowledge shows them to be too deeply sunk in the roots of our human nature. But we know now that an extraordinarily large part of cultural humanity is in the problematic situation that these needs are reasserting themselves while they are still attached to their traditional means of satisfaction; soon they will be in an impossible situation.

It is not foreseeable how this situation will end. Nowadays many people believe that the victory of the scientific spirit over religious content will remove the religious needs; others, however, stick to the old content and, with despairing efforts and support of official authorities, attempt to reassert them (74). What is needed above all is the awareness that religiosity is a determinate *form of being, a functional quality of human beings*, which is completely determining in some but only rudimentary in others, and that the development of this quality will mostly, but not necessarily, lead to *articles of faith*, to the assumption of a transcendent reality (77). Just as an erotic nature is erotic under all circumstances, whether or not it has found an object of love, so a religious nature is religious under all circumstances, whether or not it has found God. What is decisive for the religious person is the particular manner in which he or she reacts to the totality of the content of life, the particular unity in which all the details of theoretical and practical life grow

together. When we understand religiosity as a form for how the soul lives and understands the existence of things, there can be no conflict between it and science.

If, however, religiosity produces content which it sets in competition with the natural sciences, then the conflict between religion and science will endure (77–78). As soon as religion has concrete representations of reality, of objectifications of its sensibility that lie outside itself, critique will ride hard on its heels. The religious person needs to renounce the transcendental world of representations and to return to the world of immediate life. Only when religion ceases to be a sum of assertions but the determine manner of being (*ein bestimmtes So-Sein der Menschen)* is it irrefutable by science (78).

9.11 The Reality Problem

In November 1910, Simmel wrote an article which provides his deepest and clearest account of the concept of religious faith in the current context of secularism, his "Das Problem der religiösen Lage".[15]

Simmel describes the problem of the religious situation as one afflicting many intelligent contemporary observers. Such an observer does not belong to any religion; but he also does not want to dismiss religion as a mere dream. He recognizes that there is much worthy content in religion, in its moral merit, in its metaphysical depth and in its spiritual meaning; but these concern only the content of religion; they leave out of account its reality. The observer of which he is speaking believes that we are caught in the world of our experience, and that it is a hopeless undertaking to attempt to transcend this world. Though he thinks that there is much value to religion, he is convinced that it cannot answer the basic question of its reality.

So the problem of the religious situation, as Simmel describes it, goes as follows: Religious belief must have an object; but that object transcends experience; and we have no means of knowing anything that exists beyond experience. Simmel is very critical of recent tendencies which do not fully recognize the import of the "*Realitätsfrage*", which try to construct this reality through feelings or tradition (149). They are guilty of "a mystical-romantic game", of a "coquetteish concealment of unbelief through belief".

Simmel adds another important element to this situation: the need for religion (149). Simmel is convinced that there is an "indisputably present religious need". There has been a longing for religion ever since the dawn of humanity, Simmel claims, which a few centuries of Enlightenment has not been able to eradicate (150). The situation of humanity now is that it

15 Georg Simmel, "Das Problem der religiösen Lage", in *Weltanschauung*, ed. Max Frischeisen-Köhler (Berlin: Reichl & Co., 1922), pp. 328–340. GSG XII, 148–161.

has a need for religion, but that this need has to go unsatisfied because the power of criticism has destroyed so much of the content of religion. Not only particular dogmas, but transcendence as such has been exposed as an illusion.

Simmel thinks that there is no way out of this situation except by going further down the path already inaugurated by Kant. It is necessary to see religion as "an inner attitude of the soul" (*ein inneres Verhalten der Seele*) (150). Simmel had already argued for this concept of religion in his earlier "Beiträge zur Erkenntnistheorie der Religion"; but he now extends and deepens this concept. In that article, Simmel was more critical of Kant. Now, however, he thinks that Kant was fundamentally correct to make religion "an existence or event in the soul" (151).

Simmel writes of some people having a "religious nature", which functions in a religious way just as our body functions in an organic way (151). Just as people can have an erotic nature before they have found the person they love, so they can have a religious nature before they have found God. Such religious people run their lives differently from non-religious people, and they would do so even if they were living on an island never having heard of the concept of God. These people not only "have" religion but they "are" religious, their very being is religious. "Religiosity" is the "fundamental being" of the religious soul and is the source of all its special properties. The feelings of dependence, of hope, of longing, of humility, of indifference toward the earthly—all these properties flow from the religious nature.

If we understand religiosity as a state of the soul, then the whole question of the truth and falsity of religion becomes meaningless, Simmel maintains (152). For truth and falsity apply only to a belief, but not to a state of being. If we raise the question of truth or falsity, we are caught on the horns of a dilemma: either we accept a transcendent reality (for the belief to be true), or we accept that it is an illusion (for the belief is false). But Simmel raises a third possibility: that the belief itself, in its psychological reality, is something metaphysical; its meaning and reference are independent of the content (153). Subjective religiosity does not guarantee a metaphysical reality or value *outside* itself, Simmel suggests, because it already contains such a reality or value *in* itself (154). The source of such reality or value comes from the belief itself, and not from anything outside the belief. Simmel says that we can compare this to ethics, where moral meaning and value come not from the actions themselves but from the good will itself (154–155).

What Simmel is saying is that the person with true religious sense can *create* a world of religious value and meaning, so that the basis for religion does not lie in a transcendent reality but in a religious life. This life *makes* the world that is meaningful for it; it does not depend on any reality outside itself for its life to be meaningful (156–157). This is not just Schleiermacher's sentiment that nothing should be done *from* religion but everything should

be *with* religion, Simmel says, because that still leaves the source of religion in something outside the believer (157).

This still did not solve, however, the problem with which Simmel originally began. The skeptical person would still find his need unsatisfied because the question of the reality of faith is still unresolved and hanging in the balance. The person who already had faith, who already had a religious sensibility, could create his reality, to be sure, but that is because it was a reality for him; but to the outsider it would be only an *imagined* reality.

9.12 The Personality of God

Simmel's last article on the philosophy of religion was his "Die Persönlichkeit Gottes", which appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* in 1911.[16] The article explores a topic Simmel had introduced in his earlier 1905 article "Ein Problem der Religionsphilosophie", though it is now investigated in greater detail and introduces new themes. The topic sounds positively medieval, and it indeed deliberately revives an issue of traditional theology. Simmel thinks that the concept of the personality of God raises purely conceptual issues which are worth exploring for their own sake, quite apart from any faith in the existence of God. Nowhere does Simmel sound so much like a traditional theologian than in this article.

Simmel explains that his investigation into the personality of God concerns only the *content* of the representation of God, not its *reality*; hence it will leave aside all religious decisions, i.e., it will not make any commitment about the *existence* of God; it will concern only the logic of the properties attributed to God, i.e., their meaning and connections (292). This is an important qualification because it shows that even amid an investigation of the concept of God, Simmel is still observing his agnostic tenets. Simmel distinguishes between the philosophy of religion and religion itself, where the question of the existence of God is left to religion (306).

Even within these limits, Simmel states that there has been great controversy about the concept of God (292). The philosophers of the Enlightenment say that the very concept of the personality of God is an anthropomorphism; they complain about the *divinization* of the human, i.e., about stripping human traits of their finitude and making them infinite. The mystics, however, claim just the opposite: that the concept of the personality of God is a *humanization* of the divine, i.e., about attributing finite human traits to the divine. Simmel thinks that there is a middle path between these extremes: even if the personality of the human being is the *occasional cause* of the

16 Georg Simmel, "Die Persönlichkeit Gottes. Ein philosophischer Versuch", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche,* Jahrgang 22, Heft 4 (1911), 251–269. GSG XII, 290–307.

personality of God, its logical and *metaphysical foundation* is still independent of the personality of the human being. What exactly Simmel means by this he leaves for later in his article.

What is personality? Simmel had raised just this question in his earlier article "Ein Problem der Religionsphilosophie"[17]; now, however, he investigates it in much more rigor and detail. Personality, he writes, is the elevation and perfection that the form of physical organization achieves in the phase of its mental existence (292). There is an Aristotelian aspect of this definition—Aristotle had defined the soul as the form of the activities of the body—but it will disappear as the argument develops. The organism, even within its physical existence, has a much greater interchange among its parts than anything we designate as inorganic. Life takes place inside a limited circumference in which each part is determined by all the others; and, because of the close interaction of its parts, we call an organism a unity. Life is an indivisible unity, because, when it is divided, each part loses its identity; something inorganic, however, is divisible, because each of its parts *maintains* its identity when it is divided; the pieces of a rock are still a rock after the rock is divided (292–293).

But, despite its unity, the self-sufficiency of the organism is very imperfect, Simmel says. To survive, the organism has to live in a constant interchange with its environment; it lives in a give and take with that environment, so that it cannot be considered self-sufficient by itself (293). The conscious soul growing in the organism, however, shows a much greater interaction and interdependence among its parts than its physical nature. This emerges from the different ways in which causality works in the physical and mental. In the physical, the cause disappears in the effect; the cause no longer acts, so that there is no safe inference from the effect to the cause. But there is a different causality at play in the mental: the cause does not disappear in the effect because of the workings of memory (293). This means that the cause still works beyond its effect and returns as a later event. While a physical effect can have many different causes, the remembered representation has only one cause: the representation with the same content as the earlier representation. The remembered representation works with other present representations, so that the past becomes present. Due to memory, the forward-pushing causality of time becomes an interaction within the soul. This means that there is within consciousness an interaction and organic-personal unity that outstrips by far our physical nature (294).

We would become perfect personalities, Simmel says, only if the interaction with beings outside ourselves ceased and only if every occasion for mental activity were only within ourselves (296). This, however, is a mere ideal,

17 See section 8.

an idea that no empirical being ever completely fulfills. A being, which is only a part of a whole, can never be a complete and perfect personality, because there will always be something outside it on which it depends (297). The only being which is a complete and perfect personality, therefore, is God. And so Simmel writes: "…the concept of God is the proper realization of personality" (296).

At this point, Simmel thinks, it should be perfectly clear that the concept of the personality of God is not only a human being stripped of all its limitations (297). Because exactly that which limits a human being—being part of a whole, not having perfect unity—prohibits it from being a personality. We cannot reach the idea of God, then, by stripping back all limitations of a human being because it is in virtue of them that someone is a human being. God fulfills the conditions of personality by *not* being like a human rather than being like him. Here is where Simmel thinks that he has avoided all the traditional criticisms of the personality of God: God, for Simmel, has a personality precisely in virtue of *not* being like a human rather than being *like* a human.

Simmel thinks that the personality of God involves problems which are most apparent in the pantheist concept of God (298). The pantheist idea that God is identical with the world suffers from the difficulty that God then becomes *less than* omnipotent. For if God were one with the world, then there would be nothing for it to struggle against, nothing for it to exercise power upon. Similarly, the pantheist God cannot be the God of love, because if God were identical with its object, it could not love anyone but itself, which is not really love at all. Hence it seems that there must be something over and against God, something outside God for there to be power and love in God (298–299). But, Simmel notes, all this reasoning runs into a grave obstacle: if God is infinite, there cannot be anything outside itself, something which would limit it; but a God with something outside itself limiting it is a finite God, and so not God at all (299). Hence the other must be at once both inside and outside God.

Thus arises a dialectic in the very concept of God, Simmel concludes. This dialectic moves between the moments of identity with, and difference from, God, both of which are necessary for the very possibility of God. This tension is involved in the very personality of God, Simmel explains. God contains all determinations within itself, so that they are only parts of it; but it also gives independence to these determinations, so that they stand over against it (300). It is in giving these parts their own independent life that God is activity, the power of acting against something that resists it.

Simmel thinks that we should understand the personality of God according to the concept of self-consciousness (302). A decisive characteristic of personality, he maintains, is self-consciousness, the separation into subject and object. With self-consciousness life breaks apart into a subject and object

and yet finds itself in this difference. This is the basic fact (*Grundtatsache*), the basic miracle of the spirit (*Grundwunder des Geistes*), that while still in its unity it stands over against itself. The unity-in-difference Simmel was seeking in the concept of God is instantiated in the concept of self-consciousness, where one and the same self divides itself into a subject and object.

In the final analysis, Simmel's concept of God is a synthesis of the pantheistic and personal God. It is pantheistic since Simmel recognizes the importance of the moment of unity or identity, whereby God is the identity of all things and whereby nothing stands outside God. It is also personalist, however, since Simmel acknowledges the importance of the moment of difference, of something standing outside God, since it is only in virtue of it that God exercises his power and love. What reconciles the moments of unity and difference is the concept of life, which unifies and differentiates itself. Simmel summarizes both characteristics with the concept of life when he writes "…the personality of God is not a contradiction against pantheism, but a pantheism become life" (301). This emphasis on the concept of life is the hallmark of Simmel's *Lebensphilosophie*, which we will soon examine.

10

CHIEF PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY

10.1 The Question of Method

In November 1910, Simmel published what became one of his most successful works, *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*.[1] He wrote the book for the *Sammlung Göschen,* a popular series of introductions to various fields. The work became a best seller with the Verlag Göschen, going through 13,000 copies in ten weeks.[2] It was, as the publisher Wilhelm Crayen put it, "the jewel of the Sammlung Göschen".[3]

Simmel's *Hauptprobleme* consists of a short introduction and four chapters. Each chapter treats one fundamental problem of philosophy: the nature of philosophy (Chapter 1); the relation of being to becoming (Chapter 2); the relation between subject and object (Chapter 3); and problems of ethics (Chapter 4). We will devote a separate section to each chapter.

Though the introduction is very brief, it is weighty and worthy because it considers the method Simmel pursues in his history of philosophy. One has said of the understanding of an artwork, Simmel begins, that the spectator understands it when he repeats the creative process of the artist (11). The same is the case for philosophy, we are told. We can understand a philosophy only when we can relive the process of thinking that led the philosopher to it. But just as the comprehension of an artwork is the reward for a long

1 Georg Simmel, *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (Leipzig: G.J. Göschen Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1910). GSG XIV, 7–157.

2 See Georg Simmel an Edmund Husserl, 19 Februar, 1911. But also see figures cited in the "Editorischer Bericht", GSG, XIV, 476.

3 GSG, XIV, 471.

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dedication to art, so the abstract and rigid concepts of a philosophical system reveal their inner meaning and motion only to someone who has long troubled himself with the same problems. Simmel has proposed for the understanding of a philosophical work the same method he prescribed in his *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*: the listener understands the speaker when he recreates or reconstructs the same thoughts as the speaker.[4] This is an understanding, as Simmel puts it, "from the inner process" (*von dem inneren Prozeß her*).

But there is something special about understanding a *philosophy* from within, Simmel thinks, as opposed to other kinds of communication. It is not just a matter of recreating the thought or the system of a philosopher, i.e., the *result* or *product* of thinking; it is also necessary to grasp *the process* of thinking itself. This means knowing the problems the philosopher was facing and reconstructing the steps he took toward their solution. Hence Simmel characterizes his task as the "exposition and consideration" (*Darstellung und Erwägung*) of "problems and the attempts at their solution" (*Probleme und Lösungsversuche*) (12). His method is therefore not so much "historical" as it is "objective" (*sachlich*) because it considers the steps necessary for the solution of a problem. This is to say, as Simmel puts it, "a problem is not important because Plato and Hegel treated it, but Plato and Hegel are important because they treated the problem" (12).

Simmel thinks that his method puts him at odds with the usual textbook approach to the history of philosophy. This approach concentrates upon the *results* of thinking rather than the *process* that has led to them (11). It sees each philosophy as a system which has a fixed conceptual structure. There is no focus upon the problem that the philosopher was attempting to solve, and so the reasons behind the construction of his system are obscure.

Though opposed to the common textbook approach, Simmel's method was anything but new in the early 20th century. The problem orientation was advocated by Wilhelm Windelband, Rudolf Eucken, Paul Natorp and Ernst Cassirer.[5] Simmel himself had practiced this method in his lectures.

The question remains how Simmel's problem-orientation coheres with his emphasis upon the personal dimension of philosophy, which he will advocate in his first chapter. The personal dimension takes away from the purely objective method, which emphasizes how and whether a philosopher has a tenable solution to a problem. The problem-orientation makes

4 *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1892). See GSG II, 317–318.

5 On the problem orientation in the history of philosophy in the early 20th century, see Gerald Hartung, "Hauptprobleme der Philosophie (1910)" in *Simmel-Handbuch,* eds. Jörn Bohr, Gerald Hartung, Heike Koenig, Tim-Florian Steinbach (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2021) pp. 293–309, esp. 293–6.

the personal dimension disappear behind the logical reconstruction of the philosopher's reasoning. The personal dimension should be an irrelevant consideration.

One remarkable feature of Simmel's introduction is that he forswears giving his own views about the philosopher's solutions to his problems (12). He sees this as compromising the objectivity of his method. Yet it is difficult for a scholar to withhold his own opinion after reconstructing the philosopher's solution to the problem: either he solves the problem or not; and whether he does should be obvious from the reconstruction.

10.2 Chapter 1: The Essence of Philosophy

Simmel devotes Chapter 1 of *Hauptprobleme* to the problem of defining philosophy. We can define philosophy, he argues, only from within philosophy itself (13–14). Any attempt to define philosophy would be philosophy itself. Philosophy therefore revolves in a circle. Its task is to examine the presuppositions of all knowledge, which includes those of philosophy itself.

Simmel locates the source of this circularity in the attempt of philosophy to think without presuppositions (13). "Thinking begins to philosophize when it places itself beyond all presuppositions" (14). Simmel admits that "in a completely radical sense" that such an attempt is "seldom" undertaken (14). Usually, philosophy strives to be independent of *particular* presuppositions, viz., the immediate impressions of sense, traditional moral values, the validity of experience. But Simmel still insists that the presuppositionlessness of philosophy goes beyond the presuppositions of particular disciplines; for it concerns "the whole of knowledge, indeed of life itself" (14).

There is a problem with such an ideal of thinking. Simmel concedes that all thinking involves presuppositions of some kind, viz., something given, whether it be the rules of logic or the data of sense. But if all thinking requires presuppositions, and if philosophy attempts to be presuppositionless thinking, how can it be thinking at all? Simmel clearly sees this problem; his response is that philosophy is a "direction giving (*richtunggebendes*), but not an attainable goal of philosophical thought" (14). This seems to say: the philosopher will *aspire to* presuppositionlessness, attempting to keep his presuppositions at a minimum, even though he realizes he will have to make use of them.

Simmel thinks that the presuppositionless ideal has its source in the striving of philosophy to be autonomous, to be free from any outside authority and agenda. Philosophy thinks that it has the right, indeed the duty, to think independent of the presuppositions and goals of other disciplines (15). This means that every original thinker has his own goals and agendas, that he determines not only what his answers will be but also the questions that he asks (15). There is a danger here: that philosophy is in danger of splitting apart

into as many conceptions as there are philosophers, that all these conceptions will have only a name in common (15).

As a way out of this predicament, Simmel suggests that one seek the general conception of philosophy not in its goals or content but in "the attitude" (*Verhalten*) of the philosophers themselves. This will be "the formal inner constitution of the philosophers as such", or some "living condition of all philosophizing" (16). This consists in "the receptive and reactive organ to the totality of being". What the philosopher has, Simmel suggests, is "a sense for the wholeness of things and for life itself" (16). Most people, in the ordinary undertakings of their lives, are aware of particular things, of the details of their life; the philosopher, however, has a feeling for the whole of things, for how particular things fit together in a totality.

In stressing the philosopher's sense for the wholeness of things, Simmel reveals, more clearly and frankly than ever before, the metaphysical strand of his thinking. There can be no doubt about calling this strand "metaphysical" because Simmel himself refers to it as such:: "This philosophical attitude, which means a relation of the mind to the whole of the world", he writes, "has its *metaphysical* justification" (19). This leaning toward metaphysics also appears in *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* where Simmel states that Schopenhauer was a greater philosopher than Nietzsche because he "possessed the mysterious sense for the absoluteness of things".[6]

How, though, does the philosopher know the wholeness of being? This was the classical problem of metaphysics, which Simmel briefly discusses here. He concedes that the totality of things is never given to us (17). Knowledge of the whole therefore has to be constructed from the few fragments we know. There have been two ways philosophers have solved this problem in the past. One is the path of mysticism, whose exemplar is Meister Eckhart, and the other is the path of science, whose model is Kant. The mystical path insists that we strip away all the forms of things until we arrive at its pure substance or content, which is nothing less than God (18). Since all things exist in God, to know the inner core of oneself is also to know God. "We reach into the ground of the world", as Simmel puts it, "when we sink into the ground of our own soul" (18). The scientific path consists in knowing things through their forms, which comprise the essence of things. *Forma dat esse rei*, as Kant said. These forms have their genesis in the pure ego, the Kantian unity of apperception. Both the mystic and the Kantian therefore find the wholeness of being through self-awareness, though the unity of the self (25). They uncover that unity either by stripping all content of its form (the mystic) or by stripping all form of its content (the Kantian) (24–25).

6 GSG X, 188.

There is no more basic intellectual distinction, Simmel says, than that between content and form. He had made more than ample use of this distinction in all his writings, and the *Hauptprobleme* is no exception. Here he uses the distinction to explain the difference between two ways of knowing the world. But he also uses it to expound one of his favorite themes: the relativity of all knowledge. Simmel now teaches us that our grasp of the content of the world is imperfect because each of its forms is partial and limited by historical circumstances. We never grasp truth in its wholeness but only according to one partial or limited aspect. This is obvious in the case of art, whose forms are always conditioned and limited by specific historical circumstances. But Simmel insists that science too is subject to such limitations (21). The forms of science are just as limited as art because they too are never complete or perfect, and because they too are always subject to further modifications and reformulations (21–22). They are historical structures, formed by history at a particular time, so it is unrealistic to expect that they ever conform to reality as a whole (23). Simmel insists that the relativity that is claimed for philosophy also holds for science. What Fichte said about philosophy—that it depends on one's character—also holds for science. "What one regards as science in any given moment of humanity depends on what humanity is at this moment…" (22).

Simmel's reflections on the relativity and limitations of knowledge of the world he now applies to philosophy itself. Philosophy too is subject to all the limitations of any discipline, and it cannot escape the historical relativity that affects them (26). In saying this, Simmel is not only endorsing Hegel's slogan that a philosophy is the self-consciousness of its age; he is going further because he thinks, like Nietzsche, that a philosophy is the self-awareness and confession of its author; hence the limitation of knowledge is not only cultural but also personal. This personal dimension emerges through Simmel's own slogan: When one says of art that it is a worldview seen through a temperament, one should say of philosophy that it is a temperament seen through a worldview (26).

Simmel realizes, however, that we cannot take this view to such an extreme as to say that there are as many worldviews as there are philosophers (26). The claim that philosophy has a personal dimension must negotiate between two extremes, he argues (27–28). On the one hand, one cannot hold that the individual and unique personality is the ground and content of a philosophy, because then philosophy would have to forfeit its claim to universality and validity for others. On the other hand, however, one cannot maintain that pure reasoning and logic is the ground and content of a philosophy, because these are common to any cultural epoch, so that there would no diversity of viewpoint at all. There must be a third or middle ground, Simmel argues, beyond individual subjectivity and logical thinking. This middle ground consists in "the spiritual type", or the type of personality, which is neither

purely individual nor entirely generic. We cannot provide objective proof of it through reasoning; but neither does it rest only on opinion or individual feeling. What makes a philosophy true is not its correspondence with some object outside itself but rather its revelation or expression of a human type (29). The personality of the philosopher is not the content of his worldview; but it is what is expressed or revealed about the *personalitytype* through the worldview. Simmel suggests that the formula for philosophical thinking should be "the objectification of the personal" or the "personification of the objective" (30). The ultimate criterion of truth for a philosophy should then be the revelation or expression of the personal through a worldview (31).

Simmel notes how many metaphysical statements are completely false, even absurd or ridiculous, when we take them as straightforward generalizations about the world. The statement of the monist—everything is one—has no plausibility when it is taken literally. For how is it that Socrates and the squid, the mosquito in the jungle and the Prussian state, are one and the same? The statement of the idealist—that everything is only my representation—is also absurd when we regard it literally. For what does my representation have to do with the atom swirling around in the void? These statements only begin to be understood, and to have some plausibility, when they are seen as statements about *how the world seems to a kind of personality* (41–42). They are not generalizations derived from things but the reactions of kind of personality to things (42).

Simmel insists that he is not endorsing the common view that philosophers anthropomorphize the world (32). Some philosophers seem to make the world into a human being written in big letters. This is especially apparent when a philosopher identifies the world with some aspect of the human psyche, when, for example, Schopenhauer regards the world as a manifestation of the will. Simmel regards this as a mistaken conception of the metaphysician's reasoning; the very opposite is the case. The philosopher is not extending some human feature to a cosmic dimensions, but he is making that feature part of the wider cosmos. The world is not understood through the human psyche but the human psyche is understood through the world (34). The metaphysician is asking: How is the world structured so that this human feature (viz., the will, representation) can be a harmonic part of it? (33).

It is a weakness of Simmel's treatment of philosophy that he, unlike Dilthey, does not attempt to specify the kinds of personalities that are behind a worldview. We are left without a more precise understanding of the types of personalities and how they affect a worldview.

10.3 Of Being and Becoming

Chapter 2 of *Hauptprobleme*, "Vom Sein und vom Werden", treats two classical concepts of metaphysics: being and becoming. Being had been the

central concept of metaphysics since Parmenides, to whom Simmel devotes much of his attention. It has remained the center of philosophical attention throughout history: Aquinas, Wolff and Hegel also made it the first concept of their metaphysics. It is remarkable how little notice Simmel pays to the nominalist critique of the concept; it is as if his own previous adherence to that critique is forgotten. Now he wants to make sense of the concept, to explain how it has captivated so many minds for so long. Simmel has not converted to realism; but he wants to understand why it has been believed.

Being is "the first triumph of the concept", as Simmel puts it, because it grasped with one word the unity of things (44). Being is conceived as the absolute, the one and all. The concept has a double meaning: the complex of everything existing, the infinite and infinitely manifold which "is"; then the being of the world, the fact that all these things *are* or exist. In the second sense being is the universal, what is common to all the content of the world, however manifold and opposed it might be. In the first sense, it is the collective *content* of the world; in the second sense, it is the universal *form* of the world. The first sense focuses on the *multiplicity* of the world; the second sense concentrates on its *unity* (45). The confusion of these two senses has been fateful for philosophy, Simmel later argues.

Being has not been always understood in its absolute and pure sense, Simmel notes. It is usually understood through some content which is regarded as essential. Hence being is identified with spirit, the will, life, the unconscious, etc., and it is regarded only as them (45–46). It is not that being *has* such an attribute but it *is* this attribute. Simmel regards this procedure as a betrayal of the original sense of Parmenides. His first principle is that only being is, and that non-being is not. But since any determinate content has to be identified by what it excludes, by what it is not, the identification of being with any content violates the first principle.

But Parmenides himself was not always true to his first principle, Simmel says (46). For he identified being with matter, which seems to be something determinate. Still, there was something plausible about the identification. Matter has some affinity with being. It is like being because it remains the same throughout change, and because it is not the same as its properties. Still, the identification of being with matter is paradoxical: the purely abstract and rarified concept of being is identified with something very palpable, namely, matter.

Usually, though, Parmenides was more rigorous and consistent. Because only being is, and non-being is not, he maintained that there cannot be any becoming, i.e., any coming into being or any going out of being. There also cannot be anything previous to, afterwards or next to one another; all these attributes would involve non-being, in one form or another; but since non-being is not, they belong to the realm of appearance (47). For similar reasons, Parmenides insisted on the pure unity of being. This means that being is

indivisible, because if it were divided, there would be two beings where one is not the other (48). There also cannot be any distinction between thought and being; if there were any such distinction, then there would be again something that being is not.

Parmenides reasoning that all difference is only a form of appearance Simmel regards as "one of the most remarkable phenomena of intellectual history". It reveals a deep tendency in Greek thinking: it shows how the Greeks treated "purely internal representations" as if they were "indisputable external realities". Nothing better reveals the "intellectuality of the Greeks", their belief in the "sovereignty of the intellect" (47).

Parmenides philosophy of being reveals two fundamental motifs: the wonder in mere being, the fact that something is; and the passion for unity, that the multiplicity of the world is unbearable and must be relegated to the realm of mere appearance (48). There are three intertwined concepts central to this second motif: the *universality* of things; the *unity* of things; and the *fundamental reality* of things (49). Despite all the differences between things, Parmenides still held that there is something that they all have in common: the sheer fact of existence or being. What they have in common, therefore, is not some artificial abstraction created by the intellect but it is their fundamental reality. As Simmel puts it, it is not a superstructure (*Ueberbau*) created by the intellect, but a substructure (*Unterbau)* existing in things themselves (50).

In these paragraphs Simmel penetrated into the heart of the realist faith in the reality of universals. It did not suffice to dismiss this belief, he now could see, as the mere hypostasis of an abstraction because that could not explain the reality behind the abstraction, what justified calling things by the same name. This went far beyond what Simmel called "ghostly Platonism" in his *Über soziale Differenzierung*.

Although Simmel no longer charges the philosophy of being with hypostasis, he does not give it a pass on other fronts. He thinks that it is guilty of a very different fallacy: inferring existence from essence. This is especially plain in his treatment of Spinoza, whom he sees as the great modern representative of the philosophy of being. All the attributes of Spinoza's substance are best understood through the concept of being, Simmel maintains (55). Spinoza's substance is eternal, indivisible, infinite and necessary just like being itself. But there was a deep fallacy lurking in Spinoza's demonstration of the existence of substance: the conflation of the two senses of being, of being as an abstract concept with the totality of existing things (55). It is correct that being cannot be non-being, just like if a thing is black it cannot also be not-black. But this does not prove the existence of being but only the hypothetical proposition: *If* there is being, then there cannot be non-being. That being exists in the first place has still not been demonstrated (55). If substance is the totality of things, it is not necessary that it exists, because no contradiction arises in saying that they do not exist; their existence is by no means logically

necessary (56). The existence of things is therefore for Simmel, just as it was for Kant, Herbart and Schopenhauer, a contingent fact about the world.

Having discussed the monism of Parmenides, Simmel proceeds to elaborate the dynamism of Heraclitus (62). While Parmenides assigned change to the realm of appearance, Heraclitus made it the fundamental reality. For Heraclitus, the world is a process of constant coming into being and passing away; it is an eternal transition of one thing into another, where the death of one thing is the birth of another. "The world is like a mixed drink which dissolves into its elements if it is not constantly stirred" (62). Or, in a more famous metaphor, it is "a river into which we cannot step twice without it having renewed itself". If the philosopher of being holds that something is always the same despite the appearance of change, for the philosopher of becoming something always changes despite the appearance of permanence. Given this characterization, it is not surprising that Simmel regards these philosophies as one-sided, each as an extension of one side of experience at the expense of another (62).

Simmel insists that Heraclitus, like Parmenides, never brought his theme of becoming to its fullest abstraction (63). He could conceive becoming only as a relation between being and non-being, as a unity of opposites where each still had some being. He never really overcame the idea of being but only "paralyzed it" through its opposite, the idea of non-being. Reality and life consist of constant conflict, but opposites still have their fixed definite meaning (63). Heraclitus conceived a law above all this strife—a "world reason"—which assured that the opposites each found their place (64). Simmel thinks that Heraclitus never completely eliminated the idea of being because he granted it a place alongside its opposite. This shows, Simmel thinks, that the Greeks always tended toward substantializing things, and therefore toward the idea of being. For this reason, he regards Parmenides rather than Heraclitus as "the proper Greek philosopher" (64).

Simmel spends little space on the treatment of Heraclitus; he is more eager to discuss whom he regards as his modern counterpart: Hegel. He wants to expound Hegel's system from the angle of the concept of becoming, and he intends to concentrate on its formula "the self-movement of the idea" (*Selbstbewegung der Idee*) (66). So much has changed since Hegel's thought was a common inheritance of an educated Germany that it is now necessary to explain it in terms that Hegel himself would not have recognized (67). Hence Simmel explains Hegel according to the more recent ideas of Lotze, Lazarus and Steinthal.

The history of humanity reveals a series of structures which are created by human beings, but which, once created, have an objective spiritual existence beyond human individuals (67). They produced these structures; but they later reproduce them. Among these structures are moral precepts, laws, traditions, language, art, science and religion. These structures appear in some external forms, whether written, spoken, felt or seen; none of these particular

forms, however, exhaust their meaning, which remains the same throughout their particular externalizations. The content or meaning of these forms is the same in different individuals, whether they understand them well or poorly, correctly or incorrectly. This abiding structure of meaning, which exists independent of the particular individuals who do or do not apprehend it, is what Hegel called "objective spirit". Simmel interprets this concept according to the idea of validity (*Geltung*) of Lotze and the *Volksgeist* of Lazarus and Steinthal.

Though Hegel never explains his concept in just these terms, Simmel insists that they are of the first importance for an understanding of it (70). Hegel regarded Kantian-Fichtean idealism as unsatisfactory because it saw truth in subjective terms: as the creation of the ego's activity. The category of objective spirit, however, was capable of retaining something of a concept of objectivity, because it had made content and meaning independent of the subject who apprehended it. Objectivity is not some thing outside us, an external object, but it is the content or meaning of a thought, which is independent of the particular thinkers and acts of thought which apprehend it. The difference between subjective representation and objective reality, which has always made knowledge a problem, is now reconciled because in both there is the same intellectual content (70–71).

This explains Hegel's concept of objective truth, perhaps, but it comes no closer to understanding why his thinking is dynamic. What does this concept of objective spirit have to do with becoming, with the idea of the "self-movement of the idea"? The very idea seems to be a mistake because it confuses the logical with the temporal, as if thinking, not as an act but as a content, moved. Simmel does not comment on the validity of this idea; but he does give it a plausible explanation. Being becomes dissolved into becoming in Hegel's system, Simmel explains, because everything becomes what it is through its opposite (77). "Every thing becomes what it is, when it has incorporated its opposite of itself" (76). So, unless we attribute movement to thought, we cannot understand how it remains consistent with itself; we are forced to go through stages of thinking because only in that way do we overcome contradiction. Thinking goes through a process of development because we have to conceive it in stages, where one stage follows another as a matter of sheer logical necessity. What is moving in Hegel's thinking is not the psychological activity of thinking, nor even logical structure, which is timeless, but the *content* or *meaning* of thought itself.

It was a sympathetic reconstruction of Hegel, but also a prescient one. For Simmel's final statement of his own philosophy was heavily influenced by the structure of Hegelian dialectic. For Simmel foresees a moving structure in spirit, whereby it moves from a positing of limitation, to its self-negation, to an overcoming of its limitation in a new higher synthesis. We shall soon encounter Simmel's own version of the Hegelian dialectic in his *Lebensphilosophie*.

10.4 On Subject and Object

The third chapter of *Hauptproblemen* is a survey of the attempts to overcome the subject-object dualism in philosophy.

The distinction between a subject and object seems natural and given, but, as childhood development and the history of primitive peoples show, it is really the result of a long history, a late stage in the history of humanity (80). It is completely alien to naïve thinking to assume that there is a self-subsistent subject who perceives the world, and that there is a world of things that exists independent of its perception. The first image of the world is neither subjective nor objective; it stands totally beyond this opposition in the state of complete indifference (81). The naïve belief in the inseparability of the subject and object eventually gave way to "a metaphysical uncertainty", and so the attempt arose to regain the lost unity on a higher level. This unity would consist in truth: the correspondence of subjective representation with objective being. Exactly why the original unity was lost, why the dualism arose in the first place, Simmel does not explain.

The first strategy to overcome the dualism between subject and object is idealism, i.e., for the subject to envelop the object (81). This strategy first appeared with the sophists who denied the realm of objectivity and who transformed the apparent givenness of things into a state of the subject. Protagoras gave expression to this strategy when he said that "man is the measure of all things" (82). Simmel finds the same strategy in the egoism of Max Stirner, who claimed that the object had its meaning and reality only when consumed by the subject. But the most radical case of this strategy appears in Fichtean idealism, which maintains the object consists in the representations of it (83). This raised the question of how knowledge is possible if the object consists only in representation; Fichte's answer to this question is that the norm for knowledge comes from not some external object but morality. The object found its meaning in serving as a stimulus and obstacle for moral activity (83).

The next strategy is what Simmel calls "naturalism", which denies the reality of the subject and affirms only the reality of the object (84). Simmel hesitates to call such a naturalism materialism, and he maintains that the dualism between subject and object is not the same as that between soul and body. The relation between subject and object is unaffected by the metaphysical question of their substantial constitution, which would make all of nature either spiritual or mental. Nevertheless, Simmel insists that the effort of naturalism is to make the subject subordinate to the object (84–85).

Simmel writes that both these strategies, even if not explicitly, express the "objectification of the subject" (86). The first strategy does not really deny the existence of the objective world because it attempts to secure the reality

of its various contents, which means, as Simmel puts it, "the subject has taken on the solidity of the object" (87). The second strategy does not recognize the reality of the subject because it makes the subject only part of nature. Both theories stem from the uncertainty that the subject cannot avoid when it steps out of its innocent unity and faces the infinity of the object. Neither has really solved the problem of the dualism of subject and object, but from one side or the other denies the reality of its opposite, and so the existence of the very opposition it was meant to overcome.

Monism is the third attempt to solve the problem of the subject-object dualism. Monism accepts the equal reality of subject and object but it makes them both moments of absolute unity (87). Monism is not affected by the opposition between subject and object because absolute unity is pure being, which is common to both subject and object (88).

So far Simmel has expounded three approaches to the subject-object problem: the subjective, objective and monistic-metaphysical. But he insists that there is a fourth, which lacks a ready name (94). According to this fourth approach, there is a realm of ideal *content* which stands above the subjective and objective. This content has meaning or validity (*Geltung*), which is the common ground of both subjectivity and objectivity. The fundamental idea is that knowledge is not only a mental process or a state of consciousness but that it has a content which has a validity or meaning independent of whether it is thought. The content of thinking is true or false on its own and does not require a thinker to make it true or false; 2 + 2 = 4 even if no one ever thought of it, even if everyone has thought 2 + 2 = 3. The realm of truth is therefore independent of the realm of existence; it is "a third realm" independent of the subjective or objective, which both belong to opposite poles of the realm of existence.

It is unclear, however, how this approach solves the subject-object dualism. In the realm of existence the subject and object remain opposed to one another, having all their old characteristics. The question of how we know the truth has only been transferred from the realm of existence to the realm of validity; truth does not require the correspondence of a subjective representation with an object existing outside it in the realm of existence; but it still requires correspondence of a representation with the third realm of validity. The ontological dualism between the subject and object has been complicated by a third realm.

Simmel attributes this fourth position to Plato, describing it as "*die grosse metaphysische Tat Platos*" (96). But his description of it as "a third realm" owes much more to Lotze and Rickert, whose ideas became popular at the end of the 19th century.[7]

7 On Rickert's role in the promulgation of the doctrine of a third realm, see Heinrich Rickert, "Vom Begriff der Philosophie", *Logos* I (1910). 1–34, esp. 27–28.

10.5 Of Ideal Demands

In Chapter 4, Simmel introduces a whole new realm of discourse and meaning that he had not treated in Chapters 2 and 3. He had written about concepts, norms and natural laws which form the content of knowledge, and whose validity does not depend on their existence or even whether the mind recognizes them or not (103). This content forms "a third realm of validity", i.e., a realm of objectivity which is neither mental nor physical. But Simmel now informs us that there is still another layer of ideal content, which he will now examine in Chapter 4. This layer is *normative*; it comprises the sphere of what *ought* to be. Like previous layers of content, an obligation does not exist as such; and its validity is independent of whether the mind recognizes it or not. Just as the content of a representation can be true whether we represent it or not, so should a duty oblige us whether we will it or not (106). And just as a law of nature is valid before it is discovered, so a duty obliges us whether we act on it or not.

Still, the normative makes some claim on the world; it is not completely indifferent whether it is acted on or not. It consists in the demand (*Forderung*) that the ideal or obligation be realized, that it come into existence through the will and action of the subject. This demand derives its authority not from the person who makes it, still less from the person to whom it is directed, but from the sheer rationality of its content (104–105). The demand also does not derive from the imperatives of social institutions, from their need for self-preservation; it has an authority which stands above them (107). It is difficult for our habits of thought to imagine the purely ideal, the world of obligation, without some being or entity to support it; but it is necessary to break these habits because the normative is valid whether it exists or not (107–108).

So far Simmel has treated one kind of normative demand: the kind that morality makes upon us. Here it is a matter of us willing and acting as we should. But he soon considers another kind of normative demand: the kind that we make upon the world (108). Just as existence makes demands upon us that we create a better world, so we make demands on existence so that we live in a better world. We demand that the world be beautiful, that it be just, that we live happily; the realization of none of these demands depends on our will and action. One can talk about a "morality of the world order" where the world complies with our moral demands, although we cannot do anything to make it better ourselves. This moral world order is the realm of grace, which is something for which we are grateful even if we do not deserve it (109). Still, Simmel writes of grace as an ideal demand, because it describes a condition that *ought to be* even though it is never given to us. This kind of demand appears especially in religion, in the ideal of the last judgement and in the idea of God (110). We find it necessary to give our normative demands some kind of ontological backing in the nature of things, and so we resort to

the idea of God, which is the equivalent in the religious sphere of the legislator in the political sphere (111). "It is as if human beings cannot bear existence without elevating it to an ideal, and [they cannot bear] the ideal without bringing it back to being" (111).

Returning to the standpoint of morality, Simmel asks himself what competence philosophy has to determine its first principle (111–112). He reaffirms the skepticism that he once avowed in his *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*.[8] The attempt to rationalize and systematize moral philosophy runs into a great difficulty, he writes (112). This is the sheer multiplicity, in its temporal and spatial extent, of the moral ideals of humanity. This multiplicity appears utterly irreconcilable in its content; and the belief that there is a common denominator of it all is completely illusory. There is no common content to the morals of the Feugians, the Greeks, the Confucians and the Reformation; and the attempts to find such in moral philosophy itself show the greatest discrepancies (113). The history of philosophy is filled with competing ideas about the highest good. One sees it in the striving for the greatest pleasure while another finds it in the domination of reason over sensibility; some champion the striving for individuality while others advocate surrendering the self to the common interest or public good.

Some philosophers attempt to overcome this diversity of opinion by regarding them as different means to a common goal (114–115). This goal is usually held to be something like self-preservation or self-interest; but Simmel does not find this thesis plausible. On sheer empirical grounds, one knows that often people choose to do self-destructive actions, viz., suicide, or sacrifice for the common good (117). Since not all people would profess self-interest as a motive, one then resorts to the idea of it as an "unconscious goal" (116). However, this strategy will not work, Simmel argues, because there is no empirical evidence for it; in its defense, one would have to say that people act *as if* they were always motivated by self-interest. It does not follow from that, however, they are *really* so motivated; it follows only that we must *think* of them as such.

The most common attempt to find a single end of human action is eudemonism, which maintains that the goal of all human striving is pleasure (118–119). Simmel finds this hypothesis objectionable on the same grounds as the self-interest or self-preservation theory. The goal of pleasure covers so many different actions that it really has no content at all. It sees pleasure equally in cultural endeavors and in libertinage, in sacrifice for political and religious convictions as well as in limitless selfishness (119). "Humanity is not so miserable that it must be led from a single ultimate motive…" (121).

8 See chapter III, section 3.

"The self knows an abundance of values besides pleasure that function as goals of its actions" (121–122).

Simmel objects to not only eudemonism in general but utilitarianism, which would make the greatest happiness of the greatest number the principle of morality (125). He finds two problematic aspects to utilitarianism: its doctrine of pleasure and the connection between the greatest happiness principle and justice. Regarding the first aspect, Simmel cannot accept the doctrine that all differences in pleasure are only quantitative, i.e., that they differ only in strength and duration. He notes that even Kant accepts this doctrine, which he characterizes as a mere "dogma" (126). We can meaningful say, Simmel argues, that of two pleasures of equal *quantity*, one is better in *quality* than the other (127). This is not because the better pleasure has a greater moral or aesthetic worth, but because it is better as a pleasure. It is important to a human being not only *whether* he strives for happiness but *in what* he finds his happiness, whether, for example, he finds his happiness in the arms of a flirt or in hearing the ninth symphony (127). What makes for a qualitatively better pleasure, Simmel explains, is the *history* of the pleasure, its origins or what it comes from (128). It is not clear, however, how the history affects the quality of the pleasure, since its intrinsic quality as a feeling is not affected by its origins. Simmel does not address this problem.

Regarding the second problematic aspect of utilitarianism, Simmel says that the fundamental issue is whether happiness should be determined according to the equality or inequality of all individuals (130). One principle states that the share of happiness should be distributed according to merit; therefore, since different individuals contribute unequally to the common good, according to the *inequality* of all individuals. The other principle states that the share of happiness should be distributed according to equality, so that everyone receives the same amount of happiness regardless of merit. Simmel does not decide between these two but simply points out difficulties in each of them. The equality version makes all merit indifferent and irrelevant; the inequality version does not have any criterion to measure how much happiness merits deserve (131).

Summarizing, Simmel says that there are three kinds of values that are not accounted for in utilitarianism (135). The first is the qualitative differences in happiness, the greater value of a lesser quantity of a pleasure over a greater quantity. The second is the distribution of happiness, where justice consists in the *relation* between quantities but where the absolute quantity itself is indifferent. The third is the sacrifice of an individual, who does not increase the general happiness, for someone who has a greater ethical dignity.

Simmel is skeptical if we can ever declare one value as the highest good. Whatever we propose as the final good, so that all moral actions are only means to its ends, we can always propose another candidate, so that we have two competing final goods for which all moral actions are only means (136).

Each concept of the highest good usurps the dominant position from the others; but none of them can withstand the competition against themselves. Simmel asks whether claiming one ideal to be the highest good should bind oneself to denying that status to all others. "So pitiful is neither the realm of ideas, nor human nature, that one must deny the ideal demand of one content because one must secure it for a second or third" (136). Why not, then, a plurality of highest goods? Why not claim that all these different values are part of *one* life? Simmel thinks that, though all these values can *live* in one person, we still cannot *think* them as one. We still demand that there be some unity in our thinking, even if there is none in our lives (138).

This lack of unity appears must visibly in what is called "the conflict of duties" (*Konflikt der Pflichten*). This conflict reveals how the unity of a person cannot be reconciled with the diversity of his duties (138). The classic illustration of this conflict is the figure of Antigone who has a duty to bury her brother but also a duty of political obedience to leave him unburied (139). The tragedy of such a conflict is that the individual is sacrificed even though the conflict remains. The complications of life are such that we must do something immoral for the sake of morality; we still suffer a nagging conscience or feelings of regret even though we have done one duty only to violate another (140).

In the final pages of Chapter IV Simmel returns to his earlier distinction between what the world demands of us and what we demand of the world (150–151). Having discussed the first alternative in most of the chapter, he now considers the second alternative. There are two possible positions regarding this second alternative: optimism and pessimism. For optimism, the world conforms to our ideals; for pessimism, it does not conform to them. Or, as Simmel more dramatically puts it, the world is God's or the devil's (151). In this dispute the optimist is on the defensive and the burden of proof is upon him. The sum of evil, suffering, imperfection and counteridealism is so great that the pessimist has no difficulty in refuting that this is not the best of all possible worlds (151). Indeed, he regards the optimist declaration that this is the best of all possible worlds as the most radical proof yet of his position: for how bad must the world be if the present one, so filled with evil and suffering, is the best of all possible? Faced with this objection, the optimist retreats to the position of religious faith: that it is contrary to the wisdom and goodness of God that the world created by God should be evil (151). The sufferability of the world in the end rests upon our faith; our trust in human beings, our goals and our values, the chain of our demonstrations, ultimately depend upon faith.

Quite apart from the theological arguments, optimistic reasoning can take two paths, Simmel writes, one focussing upon the proximity (*Nebeneinander*) of the world elements, the other upon their succession (*Nacheinander*) (152). The first path considers the whole of the world in contrast to its particular

parts. It claims that the evil and suffering in the world concerns only its particular parts and that the whole remains unaffected by them, i.e., that the parts are integrated in an organic whole which mitigates their evil. The second path considers the whole of history and limits the suffering and evil of the world to its earlier moments while insisting upon the possibility, or even potentiality, for good in its later moments (153). This possibility is bolstered by the ideas of evolution and progress, or by the metaphysical theory that everything has the striving for perfection within itself (153).

For the overcoming of pessimism, Simmel stresses an idea of Nietzsche which, he says, has become "the light of the whole intellectual landscape" and "the consolation of the modern spirit" (154). This is the idea that life, in its inner energy and spirit, has a striving to persist and become "more of itself" (*Mehr seiner selbst*), that no obstacle, no matter how great, can ever defeat it. All the suffering and cares of life, of which the pessimist makes so much, are only gaps and imperfections, which life overcomes insofar as it is "more life", "i.e. more power, more beauty, more possession of the world". All the times of trouble and torment are only points of passage on the way to the heights of life, which are only the stage to an even higher life (155). In this passage Simmel anticipates—in thought and language—the central theme of his later *Lebensphilosophie*.[9]

No sooner has Simmel given us hope for a victory over pessimism, than he turns around and defends it (155). The idea of life turns out to be double-edged: it can be used not only to overcome pessimism but also to sustain it. Schopenhauer saw the essence of life as the rationale for his pessimism. Life was for him a ceaseless striving, without rest or goal. Because the will only wills itself, because it destroys forms of life only to will, because it creates nothing higher than itself, its existence is sheer evil; any existence is therefore worse than no existence at all (156).

While Simmel thinks that there are some arguments against pessimism, he maintains that they are still not sufficient to decide the question. What is decisive is not argument but the *attitude* toward life involved in pessimism and optimism (156). Simmel suggests that we will be able to overcome the opposition of these attitudes only by transcending the sphere of philosophy and entering the realm of faith and grace, which belongs to religion (157). With that, Simmel's introduction to philosophy comes to a close.

9 See chapter 11, section 2.

11

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

11.1 Life versus Form

In January 1918, Simmel gave a popular lecture in Berlin in which he described the culture of the present age.[1] Already for decades now, he said, the concept of life has become dominant in philosophy. It is indeed the central concept of the modern age. It is like Being in ancient Greece, God in the Middle Ages, or Nature in the Renaissance. Simmel then went on to explain how life had become the *leitmotif* of many recent cultural phenomena.[2] It was apparent in expressionism, in the rebellion against classicism, in new forms of mysticism, and even in the demand for sexual freedom.

If life were the central concept of the modern age, it was clearly important for philosophy to provide some account of it. It was for this reason that Simmel, in the final years of his life, devoted all his efforts toward defining what he called "a philosophy of life" (*Lebensphilosophie*). The irony was that this most important of all concepts was indefinable. The very attempt to define life presupposed it, so that any attempt to define it was circular. Attempting to define a philosophy of life then seemed an impossible task, doomed from the very start.

But if the concept of life could not be defined, it was still possible to describe it, to explain how and why it was so important. Life was for Simmel the source of all human activity, the basis of all thinking, feeling, perceiving and willing. Thought, feeling, perception and desire were all facets and

1 *Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur. Ein Vortrag.* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1918). GSG XVI, 186–188.
2 GSG, XVI, 191–203.

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functions of a single living human being. "*Vivo, ergo sum*", not "*Cogito, ergo sum*", has stronger claims to be the first principle of philosophy. After all, even to doubt that one is living, one has to be living.

The life to which Simmel refers is not a metaphysical reality. It is not the life present everywhere in nature, the *élan vital* of Bergson or the *Weltseele* of Schelling. Rather, it is the life of human experience, the life of a particular human being; it is the immediate reality of his or her life, what he or she thinks, feels, perceives and desires at a particular moment. Simmel does not think that human life circumscribes existence; he does not believe that everything that exists must be in some possible human experience; he allows for the possibility that there could be things existing beyond or outside life. However, human experience does define the realm of the *knowable*; and since we cannot know the transcendent, we should not concern ourselves with its existence.

If the only life we know is that of human experience, then there cannot be any end or meaning to life beyond life itself. There is no transcendent reality beyond or behind life to give it its purpose or meaning. We can know nothing of such a reality, and so it is meaningless for us. This is at least what the concept of life meant for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who were perhaps the two greatest influences upon Simmel. Simmel wrote of their concept of life: "…life cannot attain any meaning or goal outside itself…The basic fact of life gives everything meaning and measure, positive or negative worth".[3]

That life has no meaning or goal outside itself meant for Simmel that all value was determined by life itself. The good was that which preserved or promoted life; and evil was that which destroyed or damaged life. Life is not, therefore, for the sake of anything else; the goal of life is simply life itself. The *transcendent*, what is thought to lie outside or beyond life, should have no meaning or effect upon life itself. What gives value and meaning to life must be, therefore, *immanent*, i.e., it must fall within human experience.

If the end of life is human life itself, then human beings should have autonomy in directing their lives. There is no higher power or being standing above them who lays down the rules and values by which they live. Rather, human beings should determine these rules and values by themselves. There is always the danger that human beings *alienate* their freedom, that they assume there is some higher power or being who determines the rules and values by which they live, and that they lead their lives by its rules and values. Fortunately, against this danger of alienation, there is a remedy: the power of criticism, which exposes this illusory higher power or being, and which reveals that the source of all values really lies within the human being itself.

3 GSG, XVI, 188, 189.

Yet, as Simmel fully realized,[4] there was a problem with this belief in human autonomy. According to that belief, human beings lived in a world they created, and they lived by rules that they had made themselves. But this world had its own structures or forms which were rigid, fixed and unchangeable, and which demanded that people conform to them. No one believed anymore that these structures and forms were part of a natural or divine order; everyone knew that they were created by human beings themselves. Still, the structures and forms were unshakeable and unbending. Protest or rebellion against them would be severely punished. Thus people had imprisoned themselves in a world of their own making.

Self-imposed bondage is a paradox: if we bind ourselves in virtue of our own free will, why cannot we liberate ourselves by the same will? The problem lay with the very logic of the forms themselves. They have a truth or validity which is independent of our will; we have no power to make it otherwise. This is evident in the case of mathematical truths; but it is also the case in the fields of law, politics and economics. They lay down norms that are necessary to achieve certain basic ends or values. If, for example, a firm needs to make so much money X to survive under difficult market conditions, then it must produce so much; but then it must organize itself in a certain way and it must submit to a rigorous schedule of production; all its employees must then submit to this organization and schedule, though it exhausts them. The alternative is that they lose the means of their subsistence.

The independent validity of structures in logic, society, politics and economics was a major theme of the *Völkerpsychologie* of Lazarus and Steinthal, and of the philosophy of value of Heinrich Rickert. These were two of the fundamental sources of Simmel's sociology, which never failed to emphasize the independent validity of the realm of form. But it was just a fact of the modern world that this realm imposed an increasing burden on the lives of everyone who lived in it.

The growing weight of the realm of form was an enormous challenge to ethics. In his ethics, Simmel had preached the value of freedom and individuality, that every individual should lead a life of his or her choosing, and that they should be true to themselves, refusing to conform to rules and conventions. But leading such a life seemed all the more difficult and impractical in modern society, with all its dominating norms and forms. The realm of form contained norms which demanded unfaltering obedience because only in that way could one attain high levels of performance and achieve perfection or excellence.

This dilemma set the fundamental problem of Simmel's philosophy of life: How to reconcile the conflicting demands of the realms of life and form?

4 GSG, XVI, 204–207.

Life demanded originality, spontaneity, individuality and freedom; but form required conformity, discipline and order. Life without order was chaos; but form without life was oppression. It was the old classical problem of Apollo versus Dionysus; but Simmel cast it in the context of modern society and economy, which made it seem all the more irresolvable.

11.2 Last Will and Testament

Simmel's final book was his *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysischen Kapitel*,[5] which was meant to be his *Lebensphilosophie*. The book appeared in mid-December 1918, three months after Simmel's death on September 26, 1918. Simmel struggled to finish the book before his death, which, in September, he knew to be forthcoming in a matter of weeks.[6] With great exertion, he succeeded in cheating death, having completed the last correction of the proofs on September 13. Simmel considered the book to be his "last will and testament".[7]

Simmel's whole book was not just the product of his final months. This is perhaps true only of its first chapter. But the book comprised three other chapters, all of which had been published previously in *Logos*. The second chapter, "Vorformen der Idee", appeared in 1916[8]; the third chapter "Zur Metaphysik des Todes", appeared in 1910[9]; and the final chapter, "Das individuelle Gesetz", appeared in 1913.[10] Simmel wrote that the second chapter was not revised but only expanded; but the third and fourth chapters had been greatly revised so that they should be considered new. All three chapters, Simmel hoped, would be held together by the concept of life expounded in the first chapter.[11]

Simmel first conceived his book as a monograph on metaphysics, which he planned to write in the Summer Semester of 1914.[12] But in June 1918, after learning that his cancer was malignant, Simmel felt under terrible time pressure, and believed it necessary to limit the size of his book, which would now be cut to four chapters.[13] The metaphysics Simmel originally intended to

5 *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel.* (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1918). GSG XVI, 212–425.
6 See Simmel to Max and Marianne Weber, September 15, 1918, GSG XXIII, 1024.
7 See Simmel to Herrmann Graf Keyserling, March, 25, 1918, GSG XXIII, 928.
8 "Vorformen der Idee", *Logos* VI (1916/17) Heft 2, 103–141.
9 "Metaphysik des Todes", *Logos* I (1910/1911) Heft 1, 57–70.
10 "Das individuelle Gesetz. Ein Versuch über das Prinzip der Ethik", *Logos* IV (1913), Heft 2, 117–160.
11 GSG XVI, 236n.
12 See Simmel to Hermann Graf Keyserling, April 22, 1914, GSG XXIII, 313.
13 See Simmel to Hermann Graf Keyserling, March 25, 1918, GSG XXIII, 928.

write would have included a chapter on relativism[14]; unfortunately, it became a victim of a drastically shortened life prospectus.

Though it did not conform to his original plans, Simmel still was satisfied enough with his final book. He regarded *Lebensanschauung* as "my last words of wisdom, as slight as they might be".[15] Citing these words of her late husband, Gertrude Simmel distributed copies of the book to Simmel's friends.

Simmel's last letter was to Max and Marianne Weber written on September 15, 1918, a week before his death.[16] It is a moving testament to his last hours. He thanked them for their kind words and wishes, though he said they were unfulfillable. He was now sick with an incurable disease, and the doctors gave him only weeks to live. But it would have been cruelty of the gods if they prolonged his torture for months. His greetings to his friends would probably be his last, because his physical and mental powers were now exhausted. But he wanted his friends to know that he was not broken, that he was not going out of life quarreling with his fate, but with the feeling that now his time had come. His life now appeared to him complete. He had brought his last book, which would appear soon, into safe harbor. The world had given to him and he had given to it, at least with what his meager powers permitted; and he was glad that he had been spared the slow decline of age. Even in his present misery, he still felt a favorite of the gods, thankful that he could lead his life. Think of me, he wrote, as one of those who could say goodbye with his head erect. Please accept with the most inner thanks for all the friendship and love you have blessed me with. As long as I breathe, I will feel them as one of the great rewards of my life.

11.3 Life and More Life

Simmel's best statement about his concept of life appears in the first chapter of *Lebensanschauung*, "Die Transzendenz des Lebens".[17] Life, as Simmel defines it here, consists in the interplay between two fundamental drives in human nature: self-limitation and self-transcendence. On the one hand, the self must limit itself because whatever it thinks, says or does must have a determinate character, a specific form; this character or form has a limit; it is just this character or form and not another in virtue of its limited nature. *Omnis determinatio est negatio*, Spinoza said, and Simmel agrees. On the other hand, however, the self must overcome or transcend this limit because

14 See Simmel to Heinrich Rickert, 15 April, 1916, GSG XXIII, 638.
15 These words were quoted by Gertrude Simmel, GSG XXIII, 1026.
16 See Simmel to Max and Marianne Weber, September 15, 1918. GSG XXIII, 1024.
17 Georg Simmel, "Die Transcendenz des Lebens", Kap. I of *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1918). GSG XVI, 209–235.

it is constantly creative, infinite activity; it finds any limit as a constraint or control, something which it must overcome to be creative and active. In overcoming its limit, life creates for itself a new limit, which first liberates it but eventually begins to control and restrain it; it then strives to overcome this new limit; and the process goes on.

Simmel sometimes expresses the dual nature of the self in a paradoxical form. The self strives for *more-life* (*Mehr-Leben*), but also for *more-than-life* (*Mehr-als-Leben*) (229). The self strives for *more-life* because it always wants to live, to persist and continue in the process of living. The self creates or produces life in virtue of its drive for self-preservation; it always wants more life because it wants its life to continue beyond any given point; it cannot imagine its activity stopping. But life also wants *more-than-life* because it strives for immortality and eternity, which is never in life itself. This striving for immorality and eternity expresses itself in works of art or products of culture, which have a value and validity which transcend the moment of their creation (231–232). In the creation of these works or products, the self transcends itself because it creates something that stands above and beyond the flow of life. These works or products have "an independent meaningful content of their own". "One can exactly express the definition of spiritual life as something that produces what has its meaning and law in itself" (*was eigenbedeutsam und eigengesetzlich ist*) (232).

The irony is that these works and products that are *more-than-life*, which at first transcend life, begin to act as constraints upon life itself. They dominate life, so that it rebels against them and so it creates anew, replacing the old objective structures with new ones. What we see here then is a process of self-objectification and the overcoming of objectification; the self overcomes objectification when it sees the things that once dominated it are really the products of its own activity. This is the process that Hegel and Marx once described as *self-alienation*. The self alienates itself when it creates a cultural, legal or economic realm over and above itself that dominates and controls it; but it liberates itself when it sees that such a realm is really its own creation. Where Simmel goes beyond Hegel and Marx is in seeing this process as never ending, as going beyond any specific state or community. He values the process of alienation and its overcoming for its own sake, not for any goal that it seems to have beyond itself.

Though Simmel never refers to Hegel and Marx in this chapter, he does refer to two other predecessors: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (228–229). Each of them grasped one side of life. Schopenhauer saw the moment of continuity, which is beyond any limit, while Nietzsche grasped the moment of individuality, which posits limits. They did not see, however, that life is both, that it contains an infinite continuity and a limited individuality. The source of their error, Simmel says, is that they understood the self-transcendence of

life from the standpoint of the will alone but failed to see how it is also an overcoming of the will.

There is one other thinker who is often cited as a powerful influence on Simmel's *Lebensphilosophie:* Henri Bergson.[18] Simmel had known of Bergson since 1908,[19] and he was impressed by his work, especially his *Matière et mémoire* (1896) and his *L'évolution créatrice* (1907). So impressed was Simmel with Bergson that he even called him "the greatest intellect of the living generation of philosophers",[20] and arranged for the German translation of several of his works. Yet Bergson's influence on Simmel has been greatly overstated as there were profound differences between the two philosophers. Two deserve special mention. First, Simmel never accepted Bergson's speculations about the *élan vital* as a cosmic force which exists not only in consciousness but in all of nature. Such metaphysical speculations transcend the limits of human knowledge, in Simmel view. Second, Simmel never endorsed Bergson's irrationalism, his theory that only intuition could grasp the dynamism of life while concepts are limited to a static mechanical understanding of things. Simmel held that all thinking requires conceptualization, and that intuition on its own is blind. These two points of resistance to Bergson came from Simmel's Kantian inheritance, which not only restricted metaphysical speculation but also resisted intuitionism.

Simmel's "Transcendenz des Lebens" ends on an optimistic note. It seems that the process of life and its transcendence will go on forever. There is no end to the process; the energies of life will continue no matter the obstacles posed to itself. Yet this was not Simmel's only and complete view. An earlier essay, "Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur",[21] which was published in 1911, presents a much more pessimistic view. We now learn that the development of culture involves an inescapable tragedy. The alienation or objectification of culture Simmel found in his later essay here finds no solution.

Much as in his later essay, Simmel says that there are two elements involved in culture, which he now calls "the subjective soul and objective mental production" (198). The subjective soul is the life of the individual who has certain needs for its preservation. It stands opposed to the products of culture—the works of art and literature, of industry and technology, the laws and regulations of the economy and society—which have an objective existence of their own, independent of whether they are seen or recognized by the

18 The influence of Bergson on Simmel was first stated by Michael Landmann, "Georg Simmel: Konturen seines Denkens', in *Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel,* eds. Hannes Böhringer und Karlfried Gründer (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976), pp. 4–5.

19 See Simmel to Hermann Graaf von Keyserling, October 31, 1908, GSG XXII, 666.

20 See Simmel, "Bergson und der deutsche «Zynismus»', in GSG XVII, 121.

21 "Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur", *Logos* II (1911), 1–25. GSG XII, 194–223.

individuals who create them. These works and laws have their own criteria of perfection and legitimacy, and they make demands on the subjective soul of the individual which it cannot change. It is expected of the individual that it contribute to the realm of culture (203). It must learn the norms and technicalities of its specific field; and then it must contribute to them by making them more efficient, exacting and precise. These demands are made on the individual whether it likes it or not; the individual might even have to sacrifice its health or sanity to advance or perfect its field. The result of this dualism between the personal life and needs of the individual and the demands of the realm of culture is a profound alienation: the individual sees the realm of culture as a power dominating and controlling it; this realm has its own rules and values whether or not the individual even acknowledges it; and it does not care about how much the individual must sacrifice for it (207). Like Marx, Simmel sees this alienation especially in the modern division of labor (215–217). The individual produces only parts of things whose purpose it does not fully understand. "What the weaver weaves, no weaver knows" (216). The increasing specialization of all technical fields decreases the individual's creative role in it (218). But Simmel emphasizes that the alienation Marx found in commodity fetishism is only one aspect of the alienation found in the whole realm of culture (217). The same phenomenon appears in the realms of education, art and law.

Simmel calls this development a tragedy on the following grounds: "that the destructive powers directed against a being spring from the deepest levels of this being itself, that its destruction completes a fate that lies within itself …" (219). "The problematic situation of modern man", he writes, is that

> the individual finds itself surrounded by an immeasurable mass of cultural elements which are not meaningless for it, but also not in the deepest sense meaningful; as a mass they are oppressive because as an individual it cannot assimilate them but also not refuse them.
>
> *(220)*

The situation can be summarized, Simmel suggests, by the converse of an old Franciscan maxim: *omnia habentes, nihil possidentes*" (220).[22]

There was no place in Simmel's world for alienation to be overcome, for the division of labor to be replaced by a more humanistic system of production. He did not foresee a system of production where it would be possible to be, as Marx would have it, "…one thing today and another tomorow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize

22 The Franciscan adage ran "*Nihil habentes, omnia possidentes*", i.e., having nothing, possessing everything.

after dinner, just as I have a mind to, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic".[23] Alienation is endemic in all modern society, for Simmel, and it is not the result of simply a capitalist mode of production. There is no escape from the tragedy through revolution, through the creation of a new kind of society.

11.4 The Principle of Form

The first chapter of *Lebensanschauung* treated the concept of life, showing the prevalence and dominance of this concept in all aspects of the world. But this was only one half of the story. For Simmel had always counterpoised life to the "principle of form" which limits, contains and controls life. Life and form were complementary realms, antithetical to one another but each dependent on the other. Having discussed life in chapter one, Simmel now turned to form in chapter two, a chapter aptly entitled "Die Wendung zur Idee".[24]

Simmel's central concern in chapter two is showing how the realm of form has its own characteristic *sui generis* validity apart from the sphere of life, which is dominated by the relationship of means to ends. He finds this validity in several spheres of culture: in science, art, religion and law. He examines each of these spheres, showing how its characteristic claim to validity is independent of utilitarian values.

The realm of form first appears, Simmel says, in the guise of a world (*Welt*), a self-contained whole (236). A world consists in a totality which encompasses all things; it forms a unity in which all can be understood. Each of these worlds grasps the totality of things according to a specific form, which is taken from a specific sphere of human activity. Hence there is the world of art, of knowledge, of religion, of value and meaning (238). All these worlds are forms of one and the same content or matter; but we cannot grasp this content or matter in itself, apart from any specific form (238). Everything belongs to one world or another; but nothing can be without a world (239). The content of each world is *sui generis*; it cannot be transposed into another world (239).

Reality is not something absolute, as if there were really one world, for which all other worlds were only relative, contingent or subjective (242). We like to talk about "the real world", but that is only the world dominated by our practical needs and interests (240). All worlds are equally real and stand on the same footing (242). From all this, it is clear that, in the realm of form, Simmel is a relativist.

23 Karl Marx, *Die deutsche Ideologie,* MEGA (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1973), III, 33.
24 GSG XVI, 236–296.

Each of these worlds has an historical realization, a specific form it takes under historical conditions (240). Within the historical realization of a world, there is no such thing as art as such, knowledge as such, religion as such, law as such; each takes on a specific historical form (240). Each of these forms is limited in what it can express. We cannot expect, for example, the art of Giotto or Botticelli to express the color impressions of Degas' ballerinas (241). It was sheer "artistic megalomania", Simmel declares, when the naturalists declared that everything could become a work of art (241). Every specific art can grasp reality only in its fragmentary form.

We as living individuals live through all these worlds (243). They are like layers we travel through in our lives, taking bits from one world and then another. The contents of our souls are therefore only fragments of these worlds. We do not grasp even one world as a whole, but only bits and pieces of it.

Having expounded the realm of form, the ideal world, as a given phenomenon, Simmel then turns to the question of its genesis (244). He is very clear that this realm arises from life, from our needs as living beings. We human beings create the world of forms, which would not exist if it were not for our needs. They grow gradually and inevitably from these needs in particular circumstances; and they do so, because they originally were means of satisfying these needs.

But then there arises what Simmel calls "the great turn" (*die große Wendung*): the forms and functions that once served life become "independent and definitive", so that life serves them and they do not serve life (245). There is "a reversal of form", a turning away from its vital functions to its ideals. In attributing an independent validity to the realm of forms, Simmel has in mind the common neo-Kantian point that this realm does not depend for its truth or validity on anything that exists or on satisfying human interests and needs. Even though we create the world of forms, they are valid apart from our creation of them. The point is plausible enough, even if contentious. $2 + 2 = 4$ even if we never think it, and even if we deny it; justice trumps self-interest, even if do not act justly; and Michelangelo's *David* is a better sculpture than Du Champ's *Fountain*, even if all the world prefers the avant-garde.

Though Simmel promises to discuss the genesis of the realm of form in chapter two, the reader should not expect anything like Nietzsche's "historical philosophy",[25] which would explain values from their historical origin. Simmel's main interest lies in showing the exact opposite: how form is *independent* of its genesis, how its claims to validity demand the obedience of life. His argument is non-reductivist throughout, showing that form has a validity and power independent of the interests and needs that generated it.

25 See Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches,* §2, in *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe,* eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), II, 25.

To maintain the autonomy of the world of form, Simmel first argues that it is beyond the whole sphere of teleology, the realm of means and ends (247). Teleology applies best to the physical organism, he maintains. The clearest cases of teleology come from within the body, in dealing with its needs, whether voluntary or not. The real source of human creativity, however, comes when we transcend the body and the whole realm of purposiveness; it comes from human freedom itself (250). When we are truly creative, we are not subject to any ends but we enjoy our activity for its own sake. We then act according to the laws of our own nature alone (250). The opposite of freedom is not necessity, Simmel argues, but purposiveness (251). We are free if we act according to the laws of our own nature; but once we have to submit to purposes beyond or outside our nature, then we are no longer free at all (250).

Simmel strives to show how other aspects of human experience—what he calls the eudemonic and erotic—are free from the sphere of teleology, i.e., the realm of physical means and ends. First, he treats the eudemonic aspect. Human happiness is generally understood to be part of the teleology of life, he notes (251). Thus pleasure, its main ingredient, is usually interpreted as the reward for eating nourishing foods, for living in a healthy environment, for striving to procreate. But most systems of ethics, Simmel contends, have failed to see how happiness is really distinct from mere pleasure. Happiness, he insists, is of dubious worth for the physical well-being and the purposes of life (252). Unlike pleasure, the concept of happiness does not stand for any particular feeling or sensation; we cannot individuate or locate its place in the brain or body. What we feel in happiness is something more like grace (*Gnade*), a sensation of release and liberation which stands above the realm of mere life. We can seek pleasure, but not happiness, which is not a specific goal; rather, happiness comes "like rain and sunshine" (253). Simmel describes happiness with the old religious concept "blessedness" (*Seligkeit*) whose connotations suggest that it transcends the struggles and torments of the realm of life (*die Übervitalität des Glückzustandes*) (253).

Simmel then turns to the erotic aspect of life (254). There can be no doubt, he acknowledges, that love is involved in the teleology of life. The attraction of the sexes has a biological meaning for the propagation of the species. Although the pleasure of sex is often sought for its own sake, this still can be interpreted as "the cunning of nature" to achieve her ends behind the backs of individuals. The love for a single individual can also be understood to derive from the subconscious striving to create the most perfect child. Yet Simmel still insists that the erotic stands apart from the service of life (254). Whatever the genetic connection between love and sensible desire, they really have nothing to do with one another. The desire is for the species; and if it is directed toward an individual, it is only momentarily channeled and flows back into the general stream of life. Love, however, is an inner event of the

soul, one woven around the image of another individual (254). The essence of love is captured in the dictum "If I love you, what concern is that of yours" ("*Wenn ich dich liebe,was geht's dich an*") (255). "Love has left the whole category of the teleological behind", Simmel assures us. To claim that the erotic is captured in the maxim "Be fruitful and multiply" is nothing short of "high treason against the essence of love" (255).

Simmel is most concerned to establish the autonomy of the ideal realm when it comes to the field of knowledge or science. He accepts the contention of the pragmatist that in everyday life truth is defined by utility (257). In this realm we can rightfully say that we know things to the degree that they prove useful for us. But Simmel insists that the knowledge of ordinary life is not that of science, that "the principle of science" is reached only when we remove ourselves entirely from ordinary life and when we strive to know for its own sake. The realm of truth in science is defined by compliance with certain forms which are immanent to science itself. These forms are the norms of causality, of inductive and deductive inference, of systematic order and the criteria for empirical verification (261). Science is not concerned with whether these forms are true—whether they conform to some external object—and it does not bother with any grounds or justification outside them (261, 263). Science is not even concerned, Simmel says, with "the provenience of its norms" (265). Still less does not bother with the "intuitability" of its results (266). Science establishes its own legitimacy by creating its object. The Kantian claim that the understanding creates the form of nature is a valid expression for how truth is attained in science; the objects of the scientific world are its own construction (264). Within the world of science, we can prove one truth through another, by showing how it coheres with others; but we cannot provide a proof of the whole system except by a *petitio principii* (264). In his insistence on the autonomy of the world of science, Simmel resembles no one more than his great contemporary, Ernst Cassirer,[26] who puts forward a similar theory about truth in the realm of science.

Simmel is no less concerned to defend the autonomy of the ideal in the realm of art than in the realm of knowledge. The distinction between life and art is radical, he says (284). The difference between them concerns means and ends. In life, the forms are means to our ends; but in art, the forms are ends in themselves and life must submit to them. If the forms are contingent, fragmentary, or confused in life, they are commanding, complete and conclusive in art (284). It is not for the sake of the content, for revealing the subject

26 See above all Ernst Cassirer, *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1910). Though Simmel was wary of the Marburg school of Neo-Kantians, he had a great respect for Cassirer. See, for example, his comment on Cassirer's *Freiheit und Form. Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1916), in Simmel an Gottfried Salomon, 28 Dezember, 1916, GSG XXIII, 720.

matter, that aesthetic perception takes place; rather, the content is created for the sake of aesthetic perception (267, 269). Usually, we see in order to live; but in art we live in order to see (268–269). The realm of aesthetic form involves its own *sui generis* demands and ideals; they are not simply sublimations or simplifications of what we see in ordinary life (270). For Simmel, the purpose of a work of art is never to imitate or faithfully reproduce the object as it is present in the real world. Plato misunderstood the whole purpose of art when he saw it as imitation; the artist never makes claims to copy the object and he therefore cannot be accused of deception (273). The artist simply retreats into his own immanent realm and complies with the demands of his own forms (272).

In the penultimate section of chapter two, Simmel touches on the topic of religion, which is another cultural realm on par with science and art. It is significant that Simmel gives religion this status, that it is for him a human activity on par with others; there is no trace of a positivism that would banish religion as illegitimate. In this regard Simmel's attitude toward religion is very much like that of Cassirer, who, in his *Philosophie der symbolische Formen*, saw myth and religion as a potent source of symbolic forms on par with science.[27] Like Cassirer, Simmel sees religion through the eyes of an anthropologist, not a critical philosopher.

Though he fully recognizes the importance of religion as a cultural sphere, Simmel's treatment of it is very brief and sketchy (286–288). He wants to set aside the whole question of the essence of religion and to discuss only one of its developments. Religion, he writes, is above all a form of conduct (*Verhalten*) of human beings, i.e., a way of acting and living (286). It does not matter in which metaphysical context it occurs, or how it is directed toward the transcendent, still less whether it is recognized by any historical or official religion. When we experience the unique mixture of humility and elevation, of surrender and desire, of distance and surrender; when we feel both lost and secure, dependent and responsible; and when we are driven by dark desires and a deep dissatisfaction with the everyday—in all these cases, Simmel says, we are religious. These emotional states detach themselves from the stuff that stimulates them in daily life; they become absolute and create their own object. This object of faith and longing, of hope and dependence, is called God (286). The turn to the realm of forms occurs when these emotions are no longer determined by their immediate content in life but receive a depth and value of their own (287). As a form of life, religion is still stuck in the teleological realm; there it has one purpose: to please the gods. Religion acquires

27 See Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen,* in *Gesammelte Werke, Hamburger Ausgabe* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2001), XI, 18–19. Almost all of volume XII, devoted to *Das mythische Denken,* is relevant.

its own autonomous meaning when it elevates the objects of its emotions into something sublime, into what Simmel calls "the idea of the absolute" (288).

The last section of chapter two concerns the sphere of right or law. Right rose from the teleological order of things where it originally served the interests or goals of groups (289). But we cannot grasp its characteristic meaning if we regard it as a teleological concept alone. Although it began as a teleological concept, it has its own claim to validity independent of any ends that it has served. Right must be done because it is right, and not because it has proven useful; obedience to right might even require denying the values of life, which is captured in the old slogan *fiat justitia, pereat mundus* (290).[28] "As soon as we say that there is a proper right, i.e., that something should be done because it is right, all teleology falls away; right as such is an end in itself (*Selbstzweck*)" (290). There is the same reversal of values in the sphere of right as in the spheres of art and religion: "…previously something was just because it served life, but now life is good insofar as it serves justice" (290). Simmel says that the Kantian distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives comes close to his own point here (294). Only Kant was more radical in making the distinction and in stressing that the validity of the categorical imperative is completely independent of the sphere of ends. Simmel maintains instead that, though the authority of the categorical imperative is *sui generis,* it still grew out of hypothetical ones. Kant thinks that it is a mere accident, or that it is purely contingent, that moral actions arose from the sphere of teleology (294–295). Despite the difference between morality and teleology, it is still the case that morality had grown of necessity from the sphere of life (295).

11.5 The Metaphysics of Death

Just as life acquires its meaning only through its negation, death, so the philosophy of life acquires its meaning only through its negation, the topic of death. Simmel appreciated this simple point; and so he wrote: "In every age the culture of life stands in close interconnection with the meaning it ascribes to death. How we understand life and how we understand death—these are two aspects of a single basic relation" (81). This meant that, sooner or later, Simmel would have to include the topic of death in his philosophy of life.

Sure enough, Simmel wrote about death in an article which appeared in 1910 in the journal *Logos*, "Zur Metaphysik des Todes".[29] It is one of the most speculative and dense articles that Simmel ever wrote. This article was

28 "Let justice flourish though the world go to ruin".
29 "Zur Metaphysik des Todes", *Logos* I (1910/11), I Heft (April), 57–70. GSG 81–96.

the predecessor and basis for chapter III of *Lebensanschauung*, "Tod und Unsterblichkeit". We do well to examine the earlier article first.

Simmel divides the earlier article into three sections. The first treats the theme of the presence of death in life, or how death is part of life. The second considers how values and content inhere in yet transcend death. The third examines the concept of transmigration (*Seelenwanderung*).

Simmel begins his first section with a distinction between the inorganic and organic. An inorganic body differs from the organic in that its form is determined from the outside (81). An organic body, however, gets its form from within (81). Only an organic body, Simmel assumes, has an experience of death.

Insight into the meaning of death depends on freeing oneself from the idea of the *Parzen*, the goddesses of fate and death, Simmel insists. This idea means that, in a specific moment, the thread of life is cut, that it comes to its end as if struck by something outside it (82). In reality, however, death is, from the beginning and in an intimate way, bound up with life, Simmel assures us (82). Every living being, even one who is living completely and fully, stands in a total context of death (83). Death dwells in life from the very beginning; in every moment of life we are bound to death. Just as we are not complete from the first moment of our birth, so we do not die only in the last moment of our life. Death is form-giving: it forms our life not only in the moment of death; it colors all its content (83). The limit of the whole of life through death acts on its every content and moment; everything would be different in our life if we could go beyond this limit.

Death gives form to life. Just as every automatic and voluntary movement is a drive toward life, it is also a flight from death (84). Every activity of our lives is a mysterious unity which we can grasp only through its analysis into two moments: the conquest of life and the flight from death. Every step in life is not only a greater approximation to death but also a turning away from it; work and rest, acquisition and enjoyment are, instinctively or consciously, only manners of fleeing death (84). We are like the people on a ship who stride in the opposite direction of the ship; we want to go south, but the ship on which we travel goes north. This double direction of our movement determines our position in space (84).

Simmel tells us that he wants to replace the *Parzen* view of death with an organic view, according to which death is a formative moment in the continual course of life (85). It has to be asked, however, if this is completely plausible. Simmel is writing as if death were embedded organically in life; while this could be true, not all death is "a formative moment of the continuous course of life" (85). There is also violent or sudden death, which seems to give evidence in favor of the *Parzen* view. Some death involves sudden discontinuities in the course of life. The *Parzen* view seems designed for the case of tragedy, which Simmel seems to leave out of account.

In his second section, Simmel proposes what he calls "a Hegelian" view of death (85). The depth of the Hegelian view—the conflict between something and its opposite reconciled in a higher synthesis—is most apparent, Simmel claims, in the relation between life and death. Life and death, as thesis and antithesis, stand against one another on one level of being. Above them there is something on a higher level of being, where life finally comes to realize itself and discovers its full meaning (85). We normally experience the values and contents of life in a unity with the process of life; it is difficult to separate them from the process itself, because they are what we live for. Nevertheless, these values are still valid, these contents still have meaning, apart from life itself. Their validity and meaning are eternal, not subject to the changes of life itself. On a higher level, then, we separate the process of life from its values and contents. If it were not for the awareness of death, we would never separate the process of life from its values and contents; we come to appreciate these values and contents because they give meaning and value to our life; we are aware that they stand apart from and are higher than life itself (86).

The meaning of this second section is heavily dependent on the theory of value of Heinrich Rickert, for many years a correspondent and colleague of Simmel.[30] According to that theory, value and content are not processes in the world and therefore have their validity and meaning independent of it. What makes them true or false, meaningful or meaningless, is not a matter of something existing or not existing in the world. The sphere of existence is different from the spheres of validity and meaning, which are eternal and not subject to change. These spheres therefore provide Simmel with a realm above and beyond death.

Just as Simmel thinks that we can abstract value and content from the life process itself, he also thinks that we can abstract the ego from it (87). The ego is aware of content and value in the stream of life itself; but it can also separate itself from these contents, so that it is aware of itself alone (88). It is in this way, Simmel thinks, that we can give meaning to the idea of immortality (87). It is clear that Simmel wants the ego to have a kind of being independent of the flux of existence, an eternity like that of value and meaning; but it is very unclear what gives it such status. What gives eternity to the realms of value and content—their validity and meaning—does not obviously hold for the ego itself.

The third section of Simmel's article explores the theme of transmigration (89). It is not that Simmel believes such a doctrine; far from it. He refers to

30 On Rickert's theory of value and meaning, see his *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* Sechster Auflage (Tübingen: Mohr, 1928), pp. 12–13; *System der Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), pp. 112–121; and "Vom Begriff der Philosophie', *Logos* I (1911/12), pp. 12–13. On Simmel's correspondence with Rickert, see the many letters in GSG XXII and XXIII.

the doctrine as a "myth" and as a "symbol" (95). The only problem is to unwrap its meaning.

Transmigration is a version of immortality in the sense that the soul lives beyond its present incarnation and lives through many others after it. There is one and the same soul throughout its incarnations. Transmigration also implies a doctrine of pre-existence, Simmel says, because it would be strange for the soul to come into existence by accident and then to forever remain in existence (89). The indestructibility of the soul implies its not-having-come-into-existence (*Unentstandenheit*).

The ultimate difficulty with the doctrine of transmigration concerns the question "Which life ends with death?" (89). If it is the personal and individual subject, then it is difficult to understand how the next existence concerns the same indestructible subject. But if the personality is preserved in all its transformations, then it is difficult how it can be one and the same when it is now a prince, then a tiger, then a beggar, and then a jackal (89). What remains the same throughout all these transformations? Aristotle identified the soul with its specific body, and so he found the doctrine of transmigration absurd. But it is possible, Simmel argues, to have a concept of individuality which is independent of a particular soul and a particular body (91). All the different transformations of the soul will be manifestations of one and the same individual. Individuality will be to its particular manifestations like a fraction which remains the same even though its factors have no similarity (92). The individual will then be not the soul in its substantiality but in the *law* of its being (*Wesensgesetz*). Just as a law has many instantiations, which do not change its validity, so individuality will have many too.

Simmel thinks that the difficulty of imagining how a soul undergoes many transformations is no greater than that of understanding how our own self undergoes its transformations in daily life (93). We often have the feeling that the different stages of our lives exceed the limits of comprehensibility; they contain contradictions, anomalies, discrepancies and divergences, which we cannot grasp as a unity. What is it that connects the stammering child, the man at the height of his powers and the decaying old man? From one stage to the other we feel ourselves as having become someone different and we do not know what unites all these stages so that they belong to one person (94). With what justification, then, can we say that there is still one and the same person? In transmigration, the same problem—how one being can be always different yet the same—just holds on a broader scale (95). The different bodies through which the soul passes are just the different materializations that the soul passes through.

The deeper meaning of the myth of transmigration is that it brings a degree of relativity into the absoluteness of life and death (95). Rather than grasping life and death as absolute opposites, we see them as parts of unitary and infinite existence in which life and death are like links in a chain, each of

which is the beginning and end of another. This infinite existence overcomes the absoluteness of the idea of death and has for its parts the interplay (*Wechselspiel*) of a relative life and death (96).

11.6 Tod und Unsterblichkeit

Simmel continued his meditations on death in the third article of *Lebensanschauung*, "Tod und Unsterblichkeit".[31] While "Zur Metaphysik des Todes" largely focussed on the concept of transmigration, "Tod und Unsterblichkeit" concentrates more on the theme of immortality.[32] Just as Simmel wanted to explore the assumptions behind the doctrine of transmigration, so he intended to do the same with the concept of immortality. He does not claim that this concept is true; his aim is only to understand it. He admits that his explanation of it is "a purely speculative thought"; but he thinks that such speculation has "a right to toleration" because the whole matter is so shrouded in such mystery and darkness (314n).

The ego (*Ich*) stands in a category of its own, Simmel tells us, as a third something between the reality of experience and its irreal contents or values (312). In the beginning of its life, it is wedded with the individual contents before it; it focusses all its attention upon them and loses itself in their meaning. But just as the ego eventually gives these contents their own value and validity independent of its life, so it distinguishes its life from all these contents. The more we have experienced, the more the ego knows itself as one and continuous in all the vacillations of fate and experience; it is aware of itself as the same and persistent throughout all the changes in its life.

It is at this point, Simmel writes, that the idea of immortality inserts itself (312). Immortality has the meaning that the ego can completely separate itself from all the contingencies of its contents (313). It is the state of the soul in which it does not experience anything, in which it is not aware of any content outside itself but aware only of itself alone. Simmel then refers to the doctrine of the 7th century B.C. Hindu sage *Yajnavalkya*, who taught that the inner soul is distinct from the individual and that it is not subject to karma or rebirth. He explains that the soul, in its afterlife, has withdrawn into its pure functions; it has no more objects but is the pure self, the self-enclosed life of this self.

That the idea of immortality bumps against the limits of the thinkable, Simmel says, comes from having to conceive the life of the soul after the death of the body (314). Any such concept is perhaps due to a mere

31 *Lebensanschauung*', Drittes Kapitel. Tod und Unsterblichkeit', GSG XVI, 297–345.

32 The theme of immortality is introduced in "Zur Metaphysik des Todes", GSG XII, 86–88. The exposition is clearer and more detailed in the later text, however.

anthropomorphism; even the most sublime speculations still contain the most childlike primitive ideas. But it is not certain, he argues, that life is the only form in which the soul exists (314). Although the soul cannot *live* without the body, it can perhaps *exist* beyond life itself. We cannot simply equate immortality with eternal life; that would be to confuse a contradictory (not dead) with its contrary (not living) (315). There is no need to surrender to the argument of du Bois-Reymond: that if one believes in the world soul, one must be able to show its brain.

The idea of immortality arises within us, Simmel writes, for other reasons than the separability of the ego from its contents (315). We feel with every representation over which we linger that it has depths which do not come to life or expression; we realize that there is a part of it that remains implicit and inchoate. In other words, each representation leaves behind a remainder, one which seems "to knock on a closed door". If only we were immortal, we could see what is there, what is behind it. But that is not all that is lost. We also feel that there is behind every individual life innumerable possibilities which have not come to realization; we recognize that we could have had a very different life if only circumstances were different. Though there were innumerable possibilities, we were doomed to live out only one of them. "We wander through life as the only reality in the shadow realm of unrealized possibilities of ourselves, which do not come to expression but are still not nothing" (316). The discrepancy between the narrow life we lead and the wider realm of unrealized possibilities gives rise to feelings of homelessness, of helplessness, of having lost one's way. All that assuages these feelings, Simmel thinks, is a hope of immortality, which would give an escape from the dreary reality we face in life itself.

Immortality and death are not the same for everyone, Simmel thinks, but they are different according to the individuality of the soul (324). What Simmel means by this he explains through a saying of Goethe. Goethe said that he was convinced of immortality, but he believed that we were not all immortal in the same manner; the greatness of our afterlife depended on the greatness of our life here on earth. The more unique, irreplaceable and important an individual, Goethe seemed to say, the more it is deserving of immortality. When an amoeba or a frog dies, it is replaced by millions of its kind, all of which are the same as it; it is immortal not as an individual but only as a kind. Where individuals are not different but all of the same kind, the immortality of the kind replaces the mortality of the individual. The question of mortality is therefore acute only for the proper individual, for someone who is unique and irreplaceable (325).

When Goethe made immortality the privilege of an aristocracy of soul, he really meant that a person *deserves* immortality to the degree that he or she is incomparable and unique (326). He could not mean that he or she is *de facto* immortal, because he had no evidence for that. It is in fact *only the kind* that is immortal, Simmel thinks, because there are always new individuals

to instantiate it. Death comes to the unique individual alone, not the kind, which lives on through its many specimens (328). To die is therefore the mark of a higher existence, because it is irreplaceable and unique. With the death of the higher individual, the world loses more than with the average or lesser individual, because a quantum of the world itself disappears (328).

Simmel finds the idea of individuality best incorporated in Christianity. There is the greatest tension between life and death in Christianity, because the more the believer values his individuality, the more he fears death, the end of existence (331). The more he senses death, the more passionately he demands immortality to escape it. The Christian belief in individuality reaches its apex, Simmel believes, in the doctrine of "responsibility for oneself", the fact that one relies on oneself alone for salvation. In this doctrine Simmel sees "the deepest metaethical core of Christianity" (331). There is no law of justice, no solidarity with others, no concern for the opinion of the community; there is only the individual alone with this God.

There is a problem with the idea of immortality, a paradox, which has affected it since the Christian era, Simmel writes (332). This is the fact that the soul comes into existence at a particular time yet it is immortal and will continue to exist forever. How does one reconcile this finite origin with its infinite afterlife? Schopenhauer had already mentioned this discrepancy as one of the greatest paradoxes of Christianity.[33] Simmel attempts to solve the paradox, but ends out agreeing with Schopenhauer. The paradox seems to melt away, he notes, when we see that our ideas have an eternal validity yet also an origin in time (333–334). These ideas arise at a specific moment of time when someone first thinks of them; but they also have an eternal validity which is not subject to the change and decay of time. So here too we have a temporal origin of the timeless (334). The problem still remains, however, how something eternal can arise in time (336). The proper correlate of the immortality of the soul seems to be its not-having-arisen (*Unentstandenheit*) in time (333, 336). But just this is denied by the idea of birth.

The tension between a finite origin and an infinite afterlife disappears with the idea of transmigration, because here there is no birth at a particular time. Simmel now discusses the idea of transmigration in the context of immortality. Immortality takes place not in one individual but in a whole series of individuals throughout time. Death is the end of an individual form of life, not the end of the life that appears in it (336). Unlike his earlier essay "Zur Metaphysik des Todes", Simmel now proposes a solution to the fundamental

33 *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, *Werke* II, 623. See also Schopenhauer, *Der handschriftliche Nachlass*, ed. Arthur Hübscher (Frankfurt: Waldemar Kramer, 1966) III, 627. Although Simmel does not refer to Schopenhauer here, given his great knowledge of him, it is fair to assume he had him in mind.

problem of transmigration. That problem was how there could be one soul in its many transformations. Now Simmel proposes that the idea of substance be replaced with that of law (*Wesensgesetzes*) (340–341). The single soul that appears in many different lives is now replaced with a law that operates in the same way in different times and circumstances. The different lives are now welded together by a law of their transformation where this law now counts as their one soul. The ethical core of this idea is that the self gradually purifies itself through its transformations, an idea that Simmel finds more appealing than the Christian idea of purgatory, of purification through fire (339).

11.7 Individual Law

The last major essay of *Lebensanschauung* is "Das individuelle Gesetz".[34] This essay is an attempt to provide a foundation for an individualistic ethic. Individualism as an ethics first emerged in the Romantic era; its fathers were Friedrich Schleiermacher and Friedrich Schlegel, who championed the freedom and self-realization of the individual against convention and conformity. Schleiermacher and Schlegel saw their ethics as a remedy against the Kantian-Fichtean ethics of duty, which would repress individuality for the sake of universal duty, and against Bentham's utilitarianism, which was fixated on pursuit of pleasure. The cause of an individualistic ethic was later advocated in the 19th century by Dilthey and Nietzsche. Simmel appreciated the individualistic tradition and happily placed himself within it.

It is difficult to determine when, how and why Simmel developed an interest in the concept of individuality. The *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* does not discuss this topic; but in the early 20th century we find Simmel writing about the concept of individuality in Kant and Goethe, and then about the individualism of modern life. It seems to have been part of his general interest in the mentality of the modern era. In the beginning of his article "Kant und der Individualismus" he wrote that "The principal life-problems of the modern age essentially revolve around the concept of individuality…".[35] In another article, "Der Individualismus der modernen Zeit",[36] which was

34 GSG XVI, 346–425. This essay first appeared in *Logos* IV (1913), 117–160. There are significant differences between these versions. Here I cite from the later version reproduced in GSG XVI. The earlier version in *Logos* contains the revealing subtitle, removed in the later version, "Ein Versuch über das Prinzip der Ethik".

35 Georg Simmel, "Kant und der Individualismus", *Vossische Zeitung* Nr. 7 (6. Januar, 1904) Feuilleton Teil. GSG VII, 273–282.

36 Georg Simmel, "Der Individualismus der modernen Zeit", GSG XX, 249–258. This essay was not published in Simmel's lifetime. An earlier Danish version of it, "Individualismus Former", was published in *Ugeskrift for politik og kultur,* 2 (1917) 285–296. A German version of it, "Das Individuum und die Freiheit", would not appear until 1957, in Georg Simmel, *Brücke und Tür,* eds. Margarete Susman (Stuttgart: K.F. Kochler, 1957), pp. 260–269.

published only in 1917, Simmel distinguished between three concepts of individuality in the modern age. According to the first concept, which arose with the Renaissance, individuality consisted in the will to power, distinction and fame (249). The individual did not want so much to be different from others but he wanted *to be seen* to be different. The second concept, which emerged in the 18th century, was the will to be free of arbitrary power and oppressive institutions and laws. There was in this era the closest connection between freedom and equality: the old laws and institutions had created all kinds of inequality among people, so that one only had to remove them to see the natural equality among all people. All individuals were fundamentally alike if they only liberated themselves from the shackles of the past. The third concept, which begins in the 19th century, regards individuality as what is unique or distinctive about a person. The connection between freedom and equality in the 18th century now falls apart and goes in two directions: a tendency toward equality without individuality, and a tendency toward individuality without equality. The first tendency appears in socialism; and the second in Goethe, the romantics and Nietzsche (254). All free individuals, in this second tendency, would not be alike but would be different from one another. They would be free to explore and develop their individuality or differences.

It was especially the third sense of individuality that Simmel would investigate in his later work. He saw Goethe as the chief exponent of this concept of individuality.[37] Although he mentions Schleiermacher and Nietzsche among its advocates, he does not give them the same importance. Notable for his absence is the greatest modern spokesmen of the concept, Leibniz.

The fundamental question Simmel intends to answer in "Das individuelle Gesetz" concerns the source of moral obligation. Whether moral necessity receives its content and legitimation from a metaphysical reality beyond the individual, or whether it comes from the life-whole of the individual? (350). This "metaphysical reality" could be the will of God or the structure of the universe; but it also could be Kant's pure reason, which is a source of moral authority independent of the individual. The "life-whole" of the individual refers to the totality of actions constitutive of the individual, the unity of its life, what make it just this individual and no other. The default position of contemporary ethics is to place the source of moral obligation in something beyond the individual; but Simmel attempts to argue that this position is false and that moral obligation can arise only from the life of the individual.

37 See his "Goethes Individualismus", *Logos* 3 (1912), 251–274; GSG XII, 388–416; and "Kant und Goethe", *Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Beilagen* (1899) Nr. 125, 1–5; Nr. 126, 3–6; Nr. 127, 4–7; GSG V, 445–479.

Simmel immediately presents us with a paradox for the Kantian view of moral obligation, which is the most popular view opposed to his own. Kant, he argues, never really removed the source of moral heteronomy; he only placed within ourselves what had once been placed outside ourselves (355). Moral heteronomy was supposed to take place when some external source of obligation (viz. the will of God, the law of nature) was imposed on our will; but Kant removed that external source and placed a new one within ourselves in the relationship between reason and sensibility. Reason is the source of universal imperatives, which control and dominate our sensibility, i.e., our desires and emotions as sensible beings. Human beings had thus become divided within themselves, into a rational self, which originates universal laws, and a phenomenal or empirical self, which feels subjugated by these laws. The "ought" of moral obligation had a meaning, Kant argued, only if there were a desire to act contrary to its imperatives. The very concept of moral obligation therefore had heteronomy built into it.

Another problem with the Kantian view, Simmel maintains, is that it still leaves unanswered the question why I should be moral. Granted that we can derive a universal imperative from reason, the individual can still ask the question why he should obey it. He can still ask what that law has to do with him as an individual (407).

Simmel thinks that neither of these problems arises if we make the source of obligation the whole individual. There would then be no division between the rational and sensible selves, because the obligation would arise only from the undivided individual, the self who is not only a rational but also a sensible being. There would also be no problem in motivating moral action because it arises not from a universal law of no concern to me in particular but from a law that comes from my own individual nature.

Simmel's attempt to derive moral obligation from the idea of the individual seems to warrant a complete anarchism, where the obligation simply depends on the choice of each individual. We seem to confront the danger posed by Max Stirner, who made his personal will the ultimate sanction of any law. But Simmel thinks that this objection is based on a complete misconception. We must not identify the individual with the subjective, i.e., personal desires and decisions, and we must not identify the law with the objective, i.e., a source of authority that stands apart from and prior to the individual (408). There has been a persistent dilemma in all previous moral philosophy, Simmel argues, where one has to accept either the arbitrary subjective will of the individual or the objective universal law, which has nothing to do with the individual. This fails to see that there is a third option: namely, "the objectivity of the individual" or "the law of the individual" (408). We must not identify the individual with the arbitrary will, with choice or desire, because it is the *nature* of the individual, the *idea* of the whole, that is the source of obligation; what the individual chooses, or what it happens to think is his or

her obligation, might not be correct; only what conforms to its life as a whole is correct and truly obligatory. We also must not identify the law with what is objective, with a source of authority that stands above and apart from the individual, because the proper source of authority should derive from the nature of the individual itself alone.

To show how his individualism avoids the danger of anarchism, Simmel asks us to consider an example from contemporary life. Imagine, he asks, a pacifist who refuses to support the military (Simmel was writing in 1918, during the First World War). Since his conscience is opposed to the war, it seems that he cannot have an obligation to serve the military. But Simmel still assures us that, by his criterion of individuality, the pacifist should still serve his country (409). This is because his inner nature derives not only from his conscientious convictions but also involves his situation in the world, and more specifically from the fact that he is the citizen of a state. Once he takes that side of himself into account, he will be able to see that he still has a responsibility to defend his country.

The most difficult question concerning Simmel's theory concerns the nature of the individual who is the source of the law. Who, what, and where is this individual? We cannot identify it with its desires or likes, or still less with its choices. Simmel has already told us that these could be wrong and that they do not identify the law of the individual. He also insists that we cannot identify the individual with specific differences, with precisely how the individual differs from everyone else (414). What, then, is it? It is not singularity (*Einzelheit*), Simmel says, but ownness (*Eigenheit*), or "growth from one's own roots" (*das Wachsen aus eigner Wurzel*) (415). The individual is nothing less than "the whole human being" (*der ganze Mensch*) (415). This whole human being is not created but discovered by us, lying in an objective realm independent of our choices and desires (378). It is not an authority beyond the individual because it is the very nature of the individual itself.

The crucial question, Simmel insists, is whether the norm governing our actions comes from life or beyond it (416). "The universal of the individual does not stand as an abstraction above its actions, but as the root deep within them" (386). It does not seem easy to determine, however, what that universal is deep within us. The one hint that Simmel offers for how to solve this problem comes from a contrast between his position and Nietzsche's: "Instead of the desolate Nietzschean thought 'Can you will that your deed returns infinite times?', I posit 'Can you will that your action determines your whole life?'" (421) We need to ask this question, Simmel explains, because the individual is an organic unity, where the idea of the whole determines all its parts, and where no part is separable from the whole. To do an evil action therefore discredits the entire character of a person (398–399).

The best way to understand Simmel's concept of an individual law is through that thinker that he failed to identify in his list of predecessors:

Leibniz. Leibniz held that there is a unique concept answering to each individual being—what he called "*la notion d'une substance*—such that from that concept or notion we can infer everything that is true of the thing.[38] The concept of an individual forms an organic whole, all of whose parts are inseparable from it and from one another. Leibniz's notion of an individual has just the characteristics Simmel requires in an individual law: it derives from the individual itself rather than some source outside it; and it is not arbitrary because it expresses a law of its nature. That seems to solve the problem of conceptualizing the concept of an individual law, though there is still the problem of its application: how do we identify and know this law? This is especially when it is unknown even to the individual himself. We can identify the individual law, it seems, only *post facto*, when an individual has already acted on it and expressed it through all his actions. It therefore provides no guide to action or moral judgment, because we can know it only when our lives are over.

38 See Leibniz, *Discours de Métaphysique,* §§8, 13, in *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,* ed. C.J. Gerhardt (Berlin: Weidmann, 1880), IV, 432–433, 436–439.

12

AESTHETICS

12.1 Aesthetics in Simmel's Thought

Aesthetics had always been one of Simmel's main interests in philosophy. He had begun publishing articles on aesthetics in the mid-1890s, and he continued to do so until his final days in 1918. It had long been his ambition to publish a philosophy of art, which would collect his many articles in the field; but death overtook these plans. All that remains are a mass of separate articles and essays. Simmel also wrote monographs on Goethe and Rembrandt; but these belong in the realm of art history rather than aesthetics proper.[1]

Simmel occupies a unique place in the history of modern aesthetics: he was one of the few philosophers in the field to not only write about art but also to have a personal knowledge of great artists. He had befriended not only the German poets Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George but also the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. So Simmel not only philosophized about art but he also witnessed and encouraged it.

Simmel's interests in the arts were very wide. He wrote about painting, portraiture, drama, poetry, novels, fashion and porcelain; he also discussed the aesthetic qualities of mountains, cities (Rome and Venice) and peoples; and he frequently reported on exhibitions and performances. Simmel was a keen student of art history; reading art history was his favorite free-time activity. He read the prominent art historians of his age, among them Bernard

1 Georg Simmel. *Goethe* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1918), GSG XV, 7–270); and *Rembrandt. Ein kunstphilosophischer Versuch* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff, 1916). GSG XV, 305–515.

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Berenson and Alois Riegel; and he attended Heinrich Wölflin's lectures in Berlin.

Although Simmel had such broad interests in the arts, they did not extend to the most controversial art of his age, music. This is odd, not least because music was in his family. Little Georg learned the piano and wanted to play violin; through his uncle he became the heir of the Peters music business, which financed much of his later life. Yet, for reasons best known to himself, Simmel was not motivated to write much music. His early dissertation on the origins of music was his only effort in the field[2]; its failure could not have encouraged him

Although Simmel is often celebrated as a thinker of the avant-garde, he did not have the tastes of the avant-garde.[3] Of the latest developments in the arts, he had little knowledge, still less appreciation. He had no understanding of Da-da, and he had little appreciation of impressionism.[4] His tastes were rather conservative, essentially neo-classical, since he believed sensual energy and drive had to be balanced and controlled by law and form. On these grounds, Simmel never could accept the naturalism and expressionism of his day; the naturalists and expressionists attempted to represent the primitive, the uncontrolled energy of life without the restraint of form; but it was an error, he believed, to show life in all its rawness and crudity

Nevertheless, despite his conservative tastes, Simmel's aesthetics has great historical importance. If we were to summarize his importance in a single sentence, it would be this: He was the first major aesthetician of the post-romantic age. When he first wrote about art in the 1880s, the heady days of romanticism were rapidly becoming a faint and distant memory. The early romantics had found their salvation in art, whose creation they made into the very purpose of their lives. For them, art was the key to unlock the secrets of the universe, because it was the highest manifestation of the absolute, the criterion of knowledge for metaphysics. All the arts, the romantics believed, were connected in a unity which reflected that of the universe itself. Now, however, in the 1880s, all these grand beliefs had faded and wilted. No one believed in the absolute anymore, still less the powers of art to give access to it. Simmel wrote when artists and philosophers had lost their faith in the metaphysical powers of art; and he accepted as a given the separation of the arts into distinct genres. It was Nietzsche who proclaimed the end of the romantic era in his 1878 *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*. In this respect,

2 See chapter I, section 3.

3 On Simmel's tastes, see Ingo Meyer, "Kunst", in the *Simmel-Handbuch*, eds. Jörn Bohr, Gerald Hartung, Heike König and Tim-Florian Steinbach (Springer Verlag: Berlin, 2021), pp. 47–54.

4 See "Die Krisis der Kultur", in *Der Krieg und die geistigen Entscheidungen. Reden und Aufsätze* (Munich: Dunker & Humblot, 1917), GSG XVI, 41–2.

and in so many others, Simmel was the heir of Nietzsche. Simmel never had to struggle against romanticism; those battles had already been fought for him by Nietzsche, who provided him with a fresh starting point for his own philosophy of art.

Simmel's post-romantic aesthetic appears in his critical reaction to romantic doctrine and in his rehabilitation of neo-classical doctrine. Neither this reaction nor rehabilitation is transparent in the many essays Simmel wrote from the mid-1880s to the late 1900s; but no careful survey of these essays as a whole fails to reveal Simmel's reaction against romanticism as well as his rehabilitation of classicism. Simmel revives classicism in defending aesthetic laws, the principle of autonomy, the maxim of art for art's sake, and the limitation of aesthetic quantity; and he criticizes romanticism for attempting to overthrow all rules and conventions in the theatre and painting, for claiming that everything can be a work of art, and for holding that the purely natural is the secret of the dramatic art. This revival of classicism and critique of romanticism will emerge again and again from our survey of Simmel's aesthetic essays.

Such was the importance that Simmel gave to art that his worldview has been described as "aestheticism".[5] Given Simmel's failure to affirm the fundamental doctrines of romanticism, the most pure and radical form of aestheticism, this interpretation should be charged with a lack of historical perspective. It takes Simmel back into history and foists upon him the values and attitudes of an earlier generation. If "aestheticism" means giving preeminent value to art over other values in life, such as morality, politics and religion, his philosophy cannot be accurately characterized as aestheticism at all.

Nevertheless, there are still lingering traces of romanticism in Simmel. He believed that aesthetics played an important, even if not a dominant, role in social and political life. The socialist and liberal states, he maintained, were inspired by aesthetic ideals: the socialist state was moved by the ideals of order and symmetry, whereas the liberal state was beholden to the ideals of individuality and uniqueness. This residual romanticism came from Simmel's reaction against Marxism, which would relegate the aesthetic to the superstructure of the economic and material interests in society.

The term "aestheticism" has been applied to Simmel because of his advocacy of individualism and his reaction against socialism. His individualism has an aesthetic element because the ideal of the individual is often said to be

5 Sibylle Hübner-Funk, "Ästhetizismus und Soziologie bei Georg Simmel", in *Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel*, eds. Hanes Böhringer and Karlfried Gründer, (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976), pp. 44–58. For a critique of Hübner-Funk, see Peter Ernst Schnabel, "Positivism, Ästhetizismus, Impressionismus, Hegelianismus. Simmel-Renaisance in der Sackgasse?" in *Georg Simmel und die Moderne*, ed. Otthein Rammstedt and Heinz-Jürgen Dahme (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 282–317, esp. 291–295.

to make one's life a work of art, a harmony of all one's human powers. But here "work of art" is more a metaphor than the reason for an ethical ideal. And while Simmel had a negative reaction against some aspects of socialism, especially its leveling tendencies, his general reaction to socialism was positive: it was "a regulative ideal" for him.[6] According to the testimony of Hans Simmel, his father's politics were liberal or social democratic.[7]

The purpose of this chapter is not to reproduce the length and breadth of Simmel's aesthetic writings, which far exceeds the limits of one chapter. This is a task for a whole book. The aim here is to show the importance of aesthetics in Simmel's philosophy by concentrating upon a few key areas of his aesthetic thought: his reexamination of the classical legacy; his theory of the dramatic arts; his critique of aesthetic realism; and his theories of fashion and portraiture.

12.2 Early Dramatic Interests

In the 1880s, Simmel belonged to a social club of young intellectuals called *Die Zügellosen*,[8] who advocated a progressive theatre in Berlin.[9] The *Zügellosen* rebelled against imperial culture and Kaiser capitalism, which they felt as oppressive, and which they saw as a danger to individuality and freedom. They wanted theatre to expose the hypocrisy and complacency of high society and to question the nationalism, faith in science and authoritarianism of the Wilhelmine era. The literary hero of the *Zügellosen* was no less than Henrik Ibsen, whose plays were extremely popular in Berlin in the late 1880s.

The aesthetic ideology of the new progressive theatre was called "naturalism" or "realism". The aim of the theatre, the realists or naturalists held, was to reveal the life and problems of ordinary people, to show their suffering from economic exploitation and political oppression. Theatre had to be above all relevant, making the audience aware of social and political issues in their environment. Plays about great romantic heroes or tragic statesmen were now out of fashion.

One of the crucial plays of the new naturalism was Gerhard Hauptmann's *Die Weber*, which was first performed in 1893. In its subject matter and

6 On socialism as a regulative ideal, see *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*, GSG III, 327. On Simmel's early socialism, see David Frisby, *Georg Simmel* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1984), pp. 34–5, 38–9.

7 Hans Simmel, "Auszüge aus den Lebenserinnerungen", in *Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende*, p. 260.

8 The name is difficult to translate. *Der Zügel* is a rein for a horse. The term implies something like the renegades, the wild ones.

9 On Simmel's membership in this club, see Klaus Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel in Theoriebeziehungen und socialen Bewegungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), pp. 82–95; and Ralph Leck, *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology* (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 51–59.

structure the play was a paradigm of the new naturalism. The subject was of great social and political relevance: a weavers' revolt in Silesia in the 1840s. The play has no single hero or heroine, but it examines events from the perspectives of several rotating characters, all of whom are taken from ordinary life. Although the first public performance of the play was banned by the censor, a second private performance took place in the *Freie Bühne* February 2, 1893. Predictably, the play was celebrated by the left and denounced by the right. It was a great success, going through hundreds of performances in the following years.

One of the first spectators of *Die Weber* was Georg Simmel himself, who wrote a review of it, which appeared March 13, 1893 in the *Sozialpolitischen Centralblatt*.[10] Simmel thought that the play was an important cultural event, which belonged in the record of the history of his times as much as the founding of any public organization. What was new in Hauptmann's play was its content: the fate of not individuals but of whole classes of people (26). The individual characters did not make their fate but they were carried by it. The individuals could be good or evil, patient or rebellious, but their actions were determined by class. Simmel called the play "a battle against romantic individualism" because its characters were not heroes who struggle against their fate but ordinary people who suffer it. Hauptmann did not portray the weavers as noble characters but as "limited, crude and weak human beings" as their environment had created them (27).

Simmel's review ends with a protest against the censorship of Hauptmann's play. While the police had forbidden "one of the greatest art works written with the deepest moral and aesthetic purpose", they had allowed the most vulgar French farces which tease sexual feelings; and they had permitted the *Panoptikum* whose wax figures excite sadism and bestiality (28). So much for the government's concern with the "aesthetic education" of the people.

Simmel's admiration for Hauptmann's *Weber*, has led some to conclude that Simmel "not only affirmed naturalism but also understood it as the cultural core of a larger political and social movement within the progressive middle class".[11] This conclusion seems warranted; but it poses a greater problem: namely, how to account for Simmel's later essays on drama? These essays are self-conscious and deliberate critiques of naturalism. It seems here that we confront one of the major differences between the early and later Simmel. According to Köhnke, Simmel ended his early friendships around 1890 at the time of his marriage to Gertrud Kinel.[12] But does this mean that

10 "Gerhart Hauptmann's 'Weber'", *Sozialpolitischen Centralblatt*, 2 Jahrgang, 2 Band (October 1892–September 1893), 283–284. GSG XVII, 26–28.

11 Leck, *Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology*, p. 55

12 Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, p. 95.

he also renounced his early beliefs? Or did he keep them in a new guise? Before we investigate this question, chronological order demands that we treat other early articles of Simmel; for he returned to the question of naturalism only in 1908.

12.3 Sociological Aesthetics

One of Simmel's first forays into the realm of aesthetics was his "Soziologische Aesthetik", which appeared in 1896 in the magazine *Die Zukunft*.[13] Its only predecessors in this field were Simmel's articles "Böcklins Landschaften" and "Zur Psychologie der Mode", which were published only a year earlier.[14] It is from this early article that we must seek the importance of the aesthetic in Simmel's philosophy.

One would think that with the title "Soziologische Aesthetik" Simmel intends to apply the concepts of sociology to the aesthetic realm. This would be only in keeping with his endeavor elsewhere to expand and extend the powers of sociological explanation to new and neglected phenomena. But this is not at all Simmel's intention. The aesthetic is not the explanandum but the explanans of his article. His aim is to show how aesthetic interests and concerns play an influential role in the formation of society and state.

Simmel does not mean to say that the aesthetic plays a *dominating* role in the formation of society and the state; but he does intend to show that it plays at least *one* role, which has too often been neglected. Our political interests and goals are formed by our aesthetic ideals, he maintains, just as these are formed by our political interests and goals. The aesthetic and the political are cause and effect of one another. This foreshadows one of Simmel's central contentions in the *Philosophie des Geldes*, whose early drafts also date from the mid-1890s. There Simmel argued against Marxist historiography that the cultural is as much a cause as an effect of the economic as a force behind the formation of society.[15]

Simmel begins his argument by explaining what is meant by the aesthetic. "The essence of aesthetic contemplation", he says, "lies in showing that the type is in the individual, that law is in the contingent, and that the essence and meaning of things lies in the superficial and fleeting" (198). Simmel says that no phenomenon can escape this reduction to "what is meaningful and eternal"; even the most lowly and ugly can be placed in "a context of colors and forms, which bestows meaning upon it". We only need to immerse ourselves

13 "Soziologische Aesthetik", *Die Zukunft*, 17 (1896), 204–216. GAG V, 197–214.

14 "Böcklins Landschaften", *Die Zukunft* 12 (1895), 271–277, GSG V, 96–104; and "Zur Psychologie der Mode", *Die Zeit*, V (1895), 22–24, GSG V, 105–114.

15 *Philosophie des Geldes*, GSG VI, 13.

in the most indifferent phenomenon to see that it is an appearance of the ultimate unity of things. When we take aesthetic contemplation to its limit we see that there are no differences in the beauty of things. Our worldview then becomes an "aesthetic pantheism" (199).

But it soon becomes clear that there is another form of aesthetic contemplation, one that appreciates not only the unity of things but also the differences between them (199). The individual exists not only in unity with all other things but also in distinction from them. Our sensations are attuned to the differences between things, so that they note not only differences in quality but also differences in quantity, in more and less. According to our senses, everything has its place in a hierarchy, arranged from the lowest to the highest beauty (200).

We should not attempt to synthesize these different viewpoints, Simmel argues, as if they were ultimately one and the same (200). That would be like attempting to show, just because there are many shades of dawn and dusk, that there is no difference between night and day. The differences between these viewpoints is primitive and basic; they are irreducible opposites; the conflict between them is a creative tension where each gives life to the other. "The greatness and majesty of the human soul", Simmel says, is that "its life consists in these two creative yet irreconciliable forces".

The most basic form of aesthetic experience, Simmel states, is symmetry. Symmetry consists in unity-in-multiplicity, in order amid variety (201). It balances the parts of a whole, and it organizes them around a central point. Rationalism assumes its first visible form in symmetry. As long as life still appears in feelings and drives, the drive for rational control still asserts itself and seeks symmetry. But should an object acquire complete symmetry, then there arises the aesthetic need for the opposite: the irrational and its external form, the unsymmetrical.

Simmel says that this drive toward symmetry, toward a uniform ordering of elements, is characteristic of all despotic or authoritarian forms of society (203). Symmetrical order makes it easier to rule many from one point. Initiatives meet less resistance, they have a more lasting effect, and their results are easier to calculate, when they work through a symmetrical medium; their effectiveness is blunted, however, when they have to work upon something irregular and fluctuating. Charlemagne expressed this demand for symmetry when he leveled the estates in Netherlands and made them all into equal units of one whole (203). The ancient Egyptians revealed this need for symmetry in the construction of their pyramids, whose vertical organization reveals the authoritarian structure of their state.

Opposed to this drive toward symmetry is the drive toward individuality, which values each thing for its uniqueness and difference. This drive loves each thing for its own sake, and as a consequence it accepts diversity. This opposition of the individual against the general is for Simmel characteristic

of romantic beauty (207). It values the individual not because it is a member of a whole but because it is a whole itself. This love of the individual finds its most visible political manifestation in the liberal state. As an example of such liberalism Simmel cites the case of Macaulay, who loved the English constitution because of the independence it gave to each of its citizens (204). He also gives the example of Justus Möser, who despised the centralization and uniformity of despotic government and who defended the variety and individuality of the old medieval constitution (203).

The contemporary conflict between socialism versus liberalism is an expression of these opposing aesthetic preferences, Simmel adds (205). The drive for rational order is characteristic of socialism, whereas the love of individuality and diversity is characteristic of liberalism. The aesthetic aspiration of socialism is to make the state a work of art (205). Just as a work of art consists in the harmony of its elements, where each plays a necessary role in the whole, so the socialist wants his state to consist in the harmony of its elements, where each citizen contributes to the welfare of all. Liberalism finds its aesthetic inspiration in its feeling for freedom of the individual, in its sense of individual autonomy (207). However perfect the socialist's work of art, it is still a mechanism; and mechanism of any form dispenses with freedom, which is a precondition of beauty.

Thus the social question, as Simmel puts it, is not only ethical but also aesthetic (205). In declaring that the state is a work of art, Simmel simply reinstated a theme of the romantic tradition, which always stood for the wedding of the political and aesthetic. This reinstatement was, almost certainly, deliberate and self-conscious.[16]

12.4 Sociology of the Senses

In early 1905, after a hiatus of two years, Simmel went back to work on sociology. From 1905 to 1908 he wrote a series of articles with sociological themes, some of which would eventually appear in his *Soziologie*. One of these articles was his "Soziologie der Sinne", which first appeared in 1907,[17] and which later became an "Exkursus" in his *Soziologie*.[18] The article is of

16 On the state as a work of art, see Schiller, "Brief XXVII" in *Ueber die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, in *Schiller, Nationalausgabe*, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1962), XX, 412; and Novalis, *Glauben und Liebe, Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1978), II, 303. Simmel explicitly refers to the romantic aesthetic, GSG V, 207.

17 "Soziologie der Sinne", *Die Neue Rundschau*, XVIII (1907), 1025–1036. GSG VIII, 276–292.

18 *Soziologie* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1908), "Exkurs über die Soziologie der Sinne". GSG, XI, 722–42.

importance for Simmel's thinking about aesthetics because it uncovers the social dimension of aesthetic experience.

Simmel begins his article with a reflection on the state of sociology. Sociology, he writes, now finds itself in a stage of development which corresponds to biology at the beginning of its microscopic researches. Biology found how much the forms and functions of macroscopic organs—heart and lungs, stomach and kidneys—ultimately depends on the interactions between their microscopic units, the cells. Similarly, sociology now recognizes how much large social structures—states, factories, guilds, trade unions—depend on the myriads of interactions between the individuals who compose them (276–277).[19] To abstract from these interactions would be like examining the forms and functions of the physical organs of the body without considering their cellular composition. In the belief that the study of the microcosm is as important for sociology as it is for biology, Simmel embarks upon his present investigation.

In recommending a microscopic study of society, Simmel is by no means advocating a social atomism, according to which society can be understood *only* through the individuals who compose it. We have already seen how, in his earlier writings, he had endorsed a social holism, according to which the individual has to be understood by his or her place in the social whole. Simmel maintains both theses of the famous hermeneutical circle: that the whole has to be understood through its parts and its parts have to be understood through the whole. In this article he will limit himself to the first thesis.

There is one form of microcosmic life that Simmel intends to examine: how sense perception influences the interactions between individuals. This aspect of the microcosm has an epistemic priority. That there are interactions between individuals depends first and foremost on how they *perceive* one another. He wants to examine the role of *each* sense in the formation of these interactions. Each sense, he maintains, makes its own characteristic contribution to the creation of the social world.

Our sense perception of people develops in two aspects, Simmel says, each of which is of fundamental sociological significance (278). In one aspect, a sense impression works within us, arousing feelings of pleasure or displeasure, intensity or depression, excitement or pacification; the mere sight of a person, the sound of a voice, his mere presence in a room, is sufficient to arouse such a sense impression. Such impressions do not serve to give *knowledge* of another; they give only a *feeling* of him, an awareness of his presence. In the other aspect, the sense impression is directed not inward but outward at an object; what I perceive of the other is a means of *knowing* him as an object, as someone outside myself (279). These aspects are inseparable in

19 Simmel develops this argument in his *Soziologie*, GSG XI, 21–35.

our normal perception of people; we barely bother to separate them. What Simmel seems to have in mind with this distinction is something like Kant's distinction between judgments or perception (*Wahrnehmungsurteile*) and judgments of experience (*Erfahrungsurteile*), a subject he had written about years earlier.[20]

Of all the senses, the eye performs a unique sociological function: it connects individuals through their reciprocal sight of one another (279–280). This is perhaps the most immediate and purest interaction between individuals. Usually the encounters between people have an objective content, something spoken or heard, which can be communicated to others. But the eye-to-eye contact between two individuals does not crystallize into any objective content; there is no spoken or written residue; the contact is immediate and fleeting, disappearing after it occurs. When individuals see one another face-to-face they reveal one another; not only the person looked at is revealed but also the person who looks (280). In the same act in which the subject seeks to know its object, it reveals itself as an object. One cannot take through the eye without at the same time giving. The eye reveals to the other the soul that attempts to reveal it (280).

Now we know why we avoid the look of the other when we are ashamed (281). This is not because I want to avoid how others look at me, but because I want to deprive others of the possibility of *knowing* me. The look into the eye serves not only me so that I know others but also serves others so that they know me. The line that connects our eyes carries my personality and mood to the other just as it connects his personality and mood to me.

The sociological meaning of the eye depends first and foremost on the expressive meaning of the face (281). The face is the center of all our knowledge of a person. It is the essential object of intersubjective knowledge. From it we learn not only how a person acts but even aspects of his character. His face stores and records his past life. The face does not act, like the hand or the feet, but it tells a story (282). By looking at a person's face we know immediately with whom we have to deal. We are often not conscious of what we know immediately from a person's face but that is because we are usually consciously focused on special aspects or features of the person. What we know immediately from a person's face is not expressible in precise concepts; we cannot explain or describe it. The object of this immediate knowledge is nothing less than the *individuality* of a person, which is not reducible to a mere sum of qualities (282).

Each sense has its own sociological meaning (283). The blind live in a very different social world than the deaf. The blind perceive the other only in

20 "Ueber den Unterschied der Wahrnehmungs- und der Erfahrungsurteile. Ein Deutungsversuch", *Kant-Studien* I (1897), 416–425. GSG V, 235–245.

succession, through hearing one sound after the other. The traces of the past as they appear in someone's face is therefore unknown to the blind. In general, what we see in people is interpreted through what we hear from them; hence someone who can see but not hear is more confused and restless than someone who hears but does not see. Although a deaf person has a much greater memory for what is said, his object disappears with the spoken word; what is seen, however, is stable and lasts more than a moment. If it were not for these facts—that the sound disappears for the ear, that the visual object is stable and lasting—our social interactions would stand on a completely different basis (284). This shows us that human socialization, as far as we know it, is not self-evident, and that it rests upon special sensory preconditions. History already teaches us that our family structure, our economy, our legal system, our morals, all rest upon conditions that are different elsewhere. Now we find the same with physiology as with history.

Just as the senses divide everything they perceive into the categories of being and becoming, so they do the same for how one person perceives another (284). We perceive what corresponds to being and becoming in a person. The being of a person is who he is; the becoming of a person is what he is doing. These two aspects of a person are covered by different senses: what we *see* in a person is who he is; and what we *hear* in a person is what he is doing (285). But these two aspects are rarely separated; they are in constant interaction: a human being is both something persistent and something fleeting. He is therefore both seen and heard. The eye cannot take without giving; but the ear only takes and never gives; the ear is therefore "the absolutely egoistic organ" (285). But the ear limits its egoism in that it cannot turn away or close; it is destined to take in everything that comes into its proximity. It is only when united with the mouth, with speaking, that the ear not only takes but also gives (286).

After examining sight and hearing, Simmel last considers smell (289). There can be no doubt, he writes, that every person "perfumes" the air surrounding him. In the distinction between impressions directed inward and outward, smell is dominated by those directed inward; it is as if its essence goes inside us. Smell forms no impression of an object outside us. Hence there are few words for smells, which cannot be projected on the level of abstraction. Nevertheless, smells provoke strong reactions in people. It is for this reason that negroes are excluded from high society in North America; and the aversion Jews and Gentiles have for one another is often ascribed to their odor (289). The attempts to mix social classes in Germany often do not succeed simply because the higher classes take offense at the smell of the lower ones (290). As Simmel puts it: "The social question is not only an ethical but also a nasal question" (*Nasenfrage*).

The more culture has become refined, the less sharp the senses have become; but the pleasure or displeasure attending them have only grown.

Modern man is shocked by much, and finds many things intolerable which people with robust and simpler constitutions do not feel at all. This has created a greater tendency toward isolation, toward a drawing of wider boundaries between people. The growing sensitivity to smells is both a cause and consequence of these growing distances between people (290). People with a more developed sense of smell find that they experience more unpleasant than pleasant sensations (291). Because it creates more revulsion than attraction, one can say of smell that it is "the dissociating sense".

12.5 Critique of Aesthetic Realism

Only in 1908 did Simmel pick up the question of naturalism again. He had not published anything about it since his review of Hauptmann's *Die Weber* in 1893. His first article on realism, "Vom Realismus in der Kunst", appeared in the weekly *Der Morgen* in 1908.[21] In this article Simmel seems to forget his earlier review of Hauptmann; now he is a critic rather than apologist for realism. The critique of aesthetic realism in "Vom Realismus in der Kunst" echoes Simmel's critique of historical realism in his *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*.[22]

Simmel first explains what realism or naturalism—the two terms are synonymous for him—mean in application to a work of fine art. Since a work of fine art (*der bildenden Kunst*) has its object outside it, with which its forms and colors correspond, the question of its truth arises; the work is regarded as naturalistic or realistic to the degree that it corresponds with its object (404). Simmel refers to "the principle of realism" (*das Prinzip des Realismus*), which he does not explicitly define; but it apparently means something like a work of art is good to the degree that it corresponds with its object in reality.

Simmel points out an obvious problem with this principle: that there are many arts for which the question of their natural truth does not arise (404). Arts like dance and music, for example, leave no room to affirm or deny the principle of realism. Whether they correspond with an external object or model is not an issue in evaluating them.

Following his Kantian convictions, Simmel thinks that we can give the principle of realism a better formulation if we follow Kant's Copernican Revolution. That Revolution states we should derive our knowledge not from the object but from "the forms and conditions of the knowing subject" (405). In other words, to use Kant's own formulation, the criterion of truth should

21 "Vom Realismus in der Kunst", *Der Morgen*, II, July 31, 1908, pp. 992–998. GSG VIII, 404–415.

22 See chapter IV, sections 1–2.

be not that "the concept conforms to the object but that the object conforms to the concept".[23] Applied to the "principle of realism", this means that, in evaluating a work of art, one should not seek a similarity between the content of the work of art and external objects (405). We should seek truth not "outside us" in the" external world" but rather within us in the activities of our own mind. Though there must be a similarity between the work of art and the external world, that similarity is not given to us but created by us. One can achieve similarity through imitation of things in the external world, Simmel concedes; but he insists that is not necessary; one can attain the same effect through other means, using very different content, viz., through transference, symbols or analogies (406).

All this goes to show, Simmel thinks, that realism is a much wider principle than the mere imitation of appearances (406). Such imitation is one of its means; but it is not the only one; limiting it to this alone makes it a dogma and makes a mere means to an end. "Naturalism of the grand style", he writes, has always shown its strength and meaning by creating the subjective effect of nature through other means than nature itself. Indeed, the stimulus and intensity of a work of art seems to increase the more its content has a distance and independence from the natural object.

Simmel insists that we must distinguish the sensory content of a work of art—its colors, shapes and forms—from its reality. We do not perceive reality as such but only the qualities of things; reality is a thought or feeling that we add to what we perceive. Reality is something metaphysical that we add to appearances; it is not given to us by the senses but we add it to the senses (407). Such claims are only in keeping with Kantian doctrine. According to the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, reality is one of the 12 categories; it organizes perceptual content but does not create it; the content of a category is not anything perceivable.

When we receive pleasure from viewing a realistic work of art, Simmel says, the pleasure derives not only from the content of the work–from the play of colors and lines–but also from the "happiness that the world has created such existence" (408). We are pleased not only with the appearances themselves but also with the fact that they are real, that we feel them as real as ourselves. As Simmel formulates the point, somewhat paradoxically, the naturalist work of art "gives us not only the qualities of reality without reality itself, but also the happiness of reality without reality itself" (408).

It is characteristic of realistic art, Simmel says, that it creates not the illusion of reality but only *the secondary psychological reactions* to it (409; Simmel's emphasis). Many naturalist artists pretend that they do nothing more than copy what is given to them; they insist that they portray things "as they

23 KrV, Bxvi.

really are". But, Simmel replies, though an artist claims that he makes only what he sees, the truth of the matter is that he sees in things only what he makes of them. Receptivity and activity are really one and the same activity with the artist, Simmel writes. His seeing is not only reactive but productive. The artist will be most true in reflecting the content of appearances, he says, when he follows his own individuality (410).

The fine arts have no other domain than the field of appearances, what we call the qualitative content of the intuitable world (411). They cannot directly reproduce reality in itself, as it exists independent of this content. But if this is so, it seems that realistic art is no better than idealistic art in getting closer to reality. The reality of appearances, which lies underneath them, is just as transcendent as a Platonic idea, which lies above them. Realism in art then has no advantage over idealism.

So Simmel's first reflections on realism as a philosophy of arts came to a negative conclusion: however successful a play like Hautmann's *Weber* as a dramatic work, realism as a general philosophy of the arts is problematic. This seemed to show, if anything, that the desiderata of a successful dramatic production are not the same as those of a sound philosophy.

12.6 The Paradox of Drama

A few months after his article on realism appeared, Simmel published another article on the dramatic arts, his "Zur Philosophie des Schauspielers", which appeared in December 1908 in *Der Morgen*.[24] Simmel continues his offensive against realism, but his perspective is much wider and considers the problems of dramatic art in general.

Simmel begins with reflection on a puzzle inherent in the actor's art (424). On the one hand, his performance must appear natural, as if he were thinking, feeling and acting just as he would in ordinary life. On the other hand, his performance follows the script of the author, which determines what the actor thinks, feels and does. A good performance appears to be a combination of these opposing elements: being oneself and following the script. But how is this possible? As Simmel puts it, "the creative subjectivity" of the performer and "the objective content" of the play must be "outside and inside one another".

The script can never lay down precisely the requirements of a role (424). It always leaves open how an actor performs it. For this reason, three actors can play the same role in three different ways, each of them valid as an interpretation of the role. None of these performances is correct or

24 "Zur Philosophie des Schauspielers", *Der Morgen*, Jahrgang 2. No. 51/52 (1908), 1685–1689. GSG VIII, 424–432.

incorrect, as if only one of them followed from the script. How an actor plays a role does not follow according to the role itself, but from the relation of his artistic nature (*seines künsterlischen Naturells*) to the role (424).

There are two extremes to avoid here. A false objectivity which would make the actor a puppet of his role, so that all actors would play the same role in the same way; and a false subjectivity which would have the actor playing only himself, as if his role were only a garment in which his individuality appears. The problem is to know how the personality of the actor *forms* the role, so that it appears as if only he can play it (425). It is not a case of the actor only "playing himself", as "subjective realism" puts it, because the actor also has a role to play, one which he has not created; but he has to form the role so that it appears made for him alone (426).

The fundamental question is how the individuality of the actor relates to the particular role, how the actor stylizes it and presents it, so that he creates the best *dramatic appearance* (*schauspielerisches Bild*). (Simmel's italics)

Simmel likens the good actor to the "beautiful soul" of Schiller's ethics (427). The beautiful soul acts according to the moral law; but he does not feel this law a burden, as if it were contrary to his inclinations; rather, he has made it his "second nature", so that he takes pleasure in fulfilling its precepts. Similarly, the good actor will make the script of the writer into his own second nature, so that when he is acting according to it, it will seem as if he is following his own nature alone. The good actor only plays himself, as the naturalist demands; but that is because he has internalized the script of the author, making it his own second nature.

Simmel concludes his article with some general reflections on drama as an art form (428–432). All the arts show a harmony between the realms of the freedom and creativity of the artist and the necessity and lawfulness of his content. The most radical example of this, Simmel explains, takes place in drama (428, 431). What the actor says and does on stage seems to flow from his own nature, according to his own feelings and desires, as if he were completely free; nevertheless, everything he says and does is written down in a script beforehand. What appears on stage seems completely free, an autonomous realm where the characters played by the actors run according to their own internal logic; but the actors themselves perform according to a script which follows its own rules and internal logic.

Although Simmel does not make it explicit, his reflections on drama in this article are based on his concept of an individual law, i.e., a law that derives from and applies to the individual case alone. Hence he refers to "the individual law" which the actor manifests in playing a role suitable to himself alone (425). The individual law is a law because, like all laws, it demands compliance with its precepts; but it is individual because it derives from, and it is valid for, only one case in particular. The individual law is the standard

for dramatic performance because the actor must play the role as if it were written for himself alone.

Simmel had first developed his concept of individual law in his *Philosophie des Geldes*, though he had expounded this concept in greatest detail in his *Lebensanschauung*.[25]

12.7 The Actor's Art

In 1909 Simmel made another attempt to define the role of the actor in modern drama, his essay "Über den Schauspieler. Aus einer Philosophie der Kunst".[26] This essay is notable for its masterful brevity and clarity, an advance over the obscurity of "Zur Philosophie des Schauspielers", his earlier effort in the field. Simmel now makes much clearer his differences from "modern realism". The subtitle was wishful thinking on Simmel's part: he planned to make this article part of a planned collection entitled *Philosophie der Kunst*; but the project never came to fruition.[27]

Drama (*Schauspielkunst*), Simmel begins, is more than a "reproductive art". It is thoroughly creative, even if the material on which it works is already a work of art, namely, the drama of the poet (*Dichter*). The basic problem for drama, then, is how it can be productive or creative when its content is already a work of art?

This imposes a difficult task upon the actor, who has to create a work of art within a work of art. To do this, the actor has to, first of all, create the character. The character, as it stands in the script, is not a whole human being, but a complex of parts. His gestures, look, the sound of his voice, the whole atmosphere of the person is not there. To make a whole human being out of these parts, the actor must consult his own personality, his own experience and instincts, in which he finds a raw reality to be shaped by him. He has to form these parts according to a unifying idea, subject it to the laws of style, and to make the contingent and external a symbol of inner necessity. What the writer has given him is really nothing other than the direction in which this problem is to be solved, the general space of the personality which the actor has to fill.

It is not only the character that the actor has to create. He also has to shape the drama itself. The actor has *to sensualize* the drama, to give it reality in the sensible world (23). The content of the drama, as it appears in the script, is entirely mental, existing only through the soul of the poet. The

25 "Viertes Kapitel", *Lebensanschauung*. GSG XVI, 346–425.

26 "Über den Schauspieler. Aus einer Philosophie der Kunst". *Der Tag*, Morgenblatt vom 4 März 1909, Illustrierter Teil Nr. 52, pp. 1–3. GSG XII, 22–27.

27 See Textgeschichte, GSG XII, 495.

actor must make the content of the script appear in the realm of the visible and audible; the one-dimensionality of content must now appear in the three-dimensional realm.

The actor must still do more. He must do more than just sensualize the content; he must also form it according to the laws of style, so that it has its own inner unity and so that it is comprehensible to the spectator. If he were only to sensualize the content, he would not be making a work of art himself but only making it perceptible. What the actor must do is make an artwork out of the sensualization; the parts must be formed according to the "idea of a whole". The actor's portrayal must be an art work in itself, and not just a secondary form, a change only in the external form of the drama.

In the concept of sensualization all the problems of drama are centralized (24). It is in giving form to the whole production that the dramatist is prone to the temptations and diversions to what is outside the production. The danger is that the dramatist worries about the effect of his work on the real present (as opposed to the ideal) spectator. Of course, the dramatist always has to take account of the effect of his work on the public; but his is an *ideal* public, whose demands are for the maintenance of the laws of art. The actor, who feels the presence of the public in the audience seated before him, is always prone to the temptation of playing for the audience, conflating it with the ideal public. What alienates so many people from the theater nowadays is that the actor plays to the audience; hence he bastardizes the sovereign claims of art by relating to a public standing outside it (24). If the actor is not convincing, that is because there is *too much* reality in his performance, because he relates to a *living* audience which stands outside it. What justifies the complaint about the mendacity (*Verlogenheit de Theaters*) of the present theater is its fall not from reality but from non-reality.

By insisting on the autonomy of aesthetic production, by banishing the spectator from any effect on the stage, Simmel seems to be advocating modern realism. But his final two paragraphs belie any such impression. Modern realism, Simmel explains, attempts to hold in check any idea that the drama is only a play (26). One must see reality in its pure immediacy on the stage, the realist declares, and the dramatist must pretend that the audience does not exist. The realist further insists that the events on stage should unroll according to their own inner necessity and not be affected by the presence of the spectator. Though Simmel accepts some of this, he cannot agree with all of it. The realist insists that every sentence and movement should be taken from reality. But, in saying this, he overlooks the fact that the play as a whole, in its form and its language, is beyond all reality. It is an artificial construction, made according to the demands of art, and there is no point in pretending that it conforms to reality. Even worse, the realist cannot account for one important part in many dramas: the monologue. The actor talks to himself on

stage but never as he would in reality. It is here that the actor breaks through the artificial reality of the stage and talks to the public (26).

In sensualizing the drama, the actor always runs the risk of overstepping the boundaries of art. The play will seem like the real thing itself, so that there is no aesthetic distance between the play and the public; people will then judge the play according to the criteria of everyday reality. The other arts do not run this risk. They address themselves to one sense or another, and work within its limits; the audience knows that there is a sphere outside the artwork itself. The actor, however, not only produces an art work but he or she is the artwork itself; he or she therefore has the responsibility of stopping the spectator from overstepping the boundaries of art. Simmel ends his essay with the warning: there is no other art in which it is so difficult to give only art (27).

12.8 The Actor and Reality

Simmel continued to rethink the role of the actor in drama in his article "Der Schauspieler und die Wirklichkeit", which appeared in the *Berliner Tageblatt* in January 1912.[28] Here Simmel restates from new angles the themes of his earlier essays "Philosophie des Schauspielers" and "Über den Schauspieler". Like the earlier essays, this essay too was planned to be included in a volume under the title *Kunstphilosophie*. In this essay, as in the previous two, Simmel takes a critical stance toward naturalism. This should not, however, be seen as an endorsement of an opposing idealism. Simmel steers for the middle path between these opposites.

Simmel begins with a statement about the limits of common opinion. However critical one might be about general opinion, he writes, one has to concede that it often contains a grain of truth (308). But, in one field, Simmel avers, general opinion seems to be completely "abandoned by all the gods": in the field of art. Here there is a bridgeless abyss between the opinion of the majority and all insight into the essential; in this abyss dwells the deep social tragedy of art. In dramatic art (*Schauspielkunst*), which appeals to the public more than any other art, the standard of value, in the same measure as its mediocre democratization, has turned away from the artistic to the immediacy of natural impression. The essence of this art appears to ground its naturalism deeper than every other art. For the essence of this art is popularly understood as making the script (*Dichtwerk*) "*real*" through the actor.

How are we to understand the role of the actor in drama? If the play, as a written script, is already a work of art, does the actor then make the play

28 "Der Schauspieler und die Wirklichkeit", *Berliner Tageblatt*, 7. Januar 1912. GSG XII, 308–315.

a work of art of the second power, a work of art upon a work of art? Or does the actor, as a physically living being, simply make the play a convincing reality? But, if this is the case, why do we demand from his performance the impression of art and not just accept mere real nature? All the aesthetic problems of dramatic art are posed by these questions.

The figure on the stage, as portrayed in the script, is not a whole human being; he is not a human in the empirical sense; rather, he is just a literary complex of what is comprehensible in a person. The writer cannot capture all the details of his character. He has projected the fate, appearance and soul of his character onto a one-dimensional plane so that he is something purely mental. It is the actor who translates his character into a three-dimensional being, into something fully sensible. This is the first reason that the naturalist bans drama to the sphere of reality. He confuses the sensualization (*Versinnlichung*) of a mental content with its realization (*Verwirklichung*). Reality is a metaphysical category which is not resolvable into sense impressions. The actor sensualizes the drama—makes it into something we can see and hear on stage—but he does not make it into a reality. Just because it is not a reality, the actor can make it into an art, something which reality cannot do. Acting is by its very nature the art of *complete* sensualization (*die Kunst der Vollsinnlichkeit*), just as painting is the art of visualization, music the art of audial sensualization. It is *complete* sensualization because the actor creates something that we can perceive with *all* our senses. What he does on stage is something that we can see, hear and feel. The actor forms all sensual aspects of the character into a unity and gives them a style and rhythm of their own. He is the literary stylist on the stage.

But reality keeps trying to break into the realm of art, to fill a hole in it (310). How does the actor know how to act according to his role, given that it is not precisely laid out in the script? The realist's answer goes: the actor knows how to play Hamlet *from his experience*. He knows roughly and intuitively how a person like Hamlet, who has lived through similar situations, would speak and act, and so he plays his character according to such knowledge. If he did not have such experience, he would never know how to play Hamlet. But there is a problem with such reasoning, Simmel contends. It leaves out of account the actor's creative role in shaping the aesthetic impression, in giving unity to all the parts of the drama. To do this, the actor does not follow anything given in reality. The actor does not make the work of art a reality; his task is to make reality a work of art.

The actor convinces us, Simmel further explains, not by imitating something in reality but by remaining in the sphere of "artistic logic", which follows a very different logic than that of reality (311). The actor creates "a special and unifying art" of his own in addition to the writer; his reality is as far from everyday life as the creation of the writer. The artistic actor's talent does not consist in imitating people but in creating a new world of his own.

Of course, the actor's world is like that of reality; it has the same store of content; reality is only the earliest form in which one becomes aware of this content; but for that reason, it arouses the illusion that reality alone is the true object of art.

Simmel takes up the old Platonic objection that the actor is a liar because he is in reality very different from what he has us believe on stage. His response is an outlandish metaphor: it is not a lie of the locomotive driver that he does not drive a locomotive when sitting at his family table. His point is that we should not expect the actor to be on stage what he is in his everyday life. The actor is not a liar because he is a king on the stage but a poor wretch in his private life; the actor is indeed a king on the stage, not a *real* king but a *true* one, for it is he who makes the reality of what is on stage. The feeling of untruth is created only by a bad actor, either because he lets something of his real life as a poor wretch creep onto the stage or because he plays so realistically that he carries us into the sphere of reality.

Simmel summarizes his argument by stating what he calls an "axiom": *that the art of acting as such stands beyond the play (Dichtung) as beyond reality* (313; Simmel's italics). Contrary to a popular naturalism, the actor is not the imitator of how human beings behave in reality; and contrary to a literary idealism, he is not a marionette of the script, as if there were no other artistic task for him than what is in the lines of the play. It is special mistake of naturalism to think that the task of the actor is to give the drama the appearance of reality (314). This leaves out of account the dramatic art of the actor. The actor has to form the various elements of life into a whole (314). The actor stands between the script and reality; but he is not the mere mediator or servant of either of them (315). He brings both of them into an organic unity.

12.9 Art for Art's Sake

After the publication of his *Philosophie des Geldes* in 1900, Simmel must have felt a burden lift from his soul. He could now explore, in a shorter format, various topics from various fields, whether that was the philosophy of religion, the history of philosophy, feminine culture or, last but not least, aesthetics. So his writings from 1901 to 1908 come from all these fields. Among these writings are many on aesthetics.

One of the first writings on aesthetics from this period is his short essay on the aesthetic principle *L'art pour l'art*. Although the article was first published in the Berlin newspaper *Der Tag* in 1914,[29] Simmel wrote the article almost a decade earlier, in 1902/03, as a declaration for a cultural society,

29 *L'art pour l'art*, Der Tag. Nr. 5, January 4, 1914. GSG XIII, 9–15.

which was reacting "against official art".[30] This article was the first of many where Simmel examines the legacy of classical aesthetics.

Simmel thinks that the maxim *L'art pour l'art* marks an important stage in the understanding of art. He likens it to the progress made in natural science when phenomena were explained only from other phenomena in nature. It was the principle of the autonomy of natural explanation, according to which explanation from other spheres (viz., religion) were excluded as irrelevant to science. Similarly, in the field of art one had to exclude all religious, political and ethical criteria in assessing and creating a work of art. An art work had to be judged according to its own ends, and not according to whether it satisfied the demands of religion, politics or morality.

Simmel tells us that he takes the maxim *L'art pour l'art* not in its "historical original sense", which was narrow and rationalistic, but in its wider sense, according to which it excludes everything that it is not completely within the sphere of art (14). That this exclusion happened, he writes, was of "irreplaceable and unloseable value". It separated aesthetic value from literary and ethical, from religious and sensual values, and made it possible to take art on its own terms. But there was a problem with this theory, Simmel argues, because it understood the aesthetic in a very narrow and rationalistic sense. It took the whole of the art work in a hermetic sense so as to exclude any wider whole of which it was only a part. It was a kind of aesthetic rigorism comparable to the ethical rigorism of Kant. He abstracted ethical value from its context in life and elevated it to supreme position, so that he lost track of how it is originally part of the whole of human life itself (15).

Simmel says that in the last decades there has been a mechanical, indeed mathematical, tendency in aesthetic theory (9). All reconstruction of a work of art takes place according to what he calls "the bill" or "the reckoning" (*die Rechnung*) of the artist. This reckoning consists in analyzing the work of art into all its parts or elements: the vertical and horizontal lines, the triangles and squares in the composition, the balance of the forces, the complementarity of the colors and so on. Analyzing a work of art into all these elements, and then putting them back together again, is what it means "to explain" it. Such an explanation does not prejudice, Simmel reassures us, understanding a work of art from within, according to its unity or center. This explanation of a work of art is akin to explanation in natural science, where a body is analyzed into its elements, and then put back together (10).

Simmel thinks that this kind of explanation is a great step forward in the understanding of a work of art (10). He does not assume, as many do, that the analysis of a work makes impossible its understanding as a whole. The whole can be reconstructed without losing any of its essential

30 See Klaus Latzel, "Text Geschichte", GSG XIII, 396, 405.

meaning or purpose. He connects the doctrine of the autonomy of art with this theory of aesthetic explanation; the work's autonomy means that *everything within the work of art can be explained entirely* according to these elements.

Though Simmel endorses the principle of aesthetic autonomy, he still thinks that there are problems with it. It provides a *necessary*, but not a *sufficient*, understanding of a work of art. The problem with the principle is that it abstracts a work of art from its general context, from the life from which it came. The work of art is a self-sufficient whole, to be sure, but it is necessary to remember that whole is part of another wider whole, of which it is only a part. The work of art has to be understood within the context of life, society and culture (10–11). These extra aesthetic factors are crucial to understanding the aesthetic ones. This is what Simmel calls the "detour over the whole" (*Umweg über das Ganze*) (11), which takes the spectator beyond and behind the work to understand its wider social and cultural genesis.

It seems a provable proposition in the world of art, when it is not a question of mere reproduction and its mechanism, that the mere technical side of a production cannot be the highest perfection of the work (12). Technique alone, no matter how perfect, cannot make for the perfection of the work itself; it cannot be the chief business and final goal of the work. The greatest artists must therefore be something more than great artists. In viewing a work of art we always feel that there must be something more behind it than the perfection of its form and the skill of the artist: "an enormous width and intensity of the whole of life" (12). The perfection of the artist as an artist must be found in the fact that he is more than an artist.

The principle that the whole must be an element of a wider whole is valid for the spectator no less than the artist (13). The redemption of aesthetic experience comes from its being a world unto itself, that it is self-enclosed and needs nothing outside itself. The work of art takes in a space which excludes all surrounding reality, so that we feel liberated from all the complications of life. Nevertheless, this experience is also placed within our life and surrounded by it. What is outside this experience, that from which we feel liberated, is still part of life itself. Hence Simmel writes of "the double place of a work of art" (*Doppelstellung des Kunstwerks*): "that the work of art is completely self-enclosed and exempt from the needs of life yet fully embedded in the stream of life" (13). Perhaps, Simmel suggests, this double place is really a unity and something we impose upon art from our limited categories of understanding it. He leaves us with the prospect of having to find the unity that joins the double space. So while the maxim *L'art pour l'art* is perfectly correct, it should perhaps be reformulated to say *la vie pour l'art* and *l'art pour la vie* (15).

12.10 On Aesthetic Quantity

Another article where Simmel reexamines classical aesthetics concerns a seemingly implausible topic: quantity in a work of art. Simmel's interest in this topic came from one dogma of modern aesthetics: that anything could be the subject of a work of art. According to this dogma, the powers of art were absolute and limitless. Simmel was skeptical. His skepticism emerges in a lecture and essay from 1903, "Über ästhetische Quantitäten" and "Die ästhetische Quantität".[31]

The enthusiastic belief in the sovereignty of art and its limitless expanse, Simmel begins, has seduced two aesthetic directions. These are completely opposed to one another, but they have fallen into the same error (190). These directions are abstract idealism, which sees the exclusive goal of art in the depiction of spatial form, and naturalism, which attempts to reproduce things in their immediacy. Both believe that the essential principle of art has the same relation to all the contents of life. They hold that any object can be taken into the circle of artistic form and be given an artistic meaning. This is a repudiation of the old dogma that the subject matter of art must be a *beautiful* object, i.e., something that is beautiful in reality and according to different criteria than artistic form. It ultimately derives from the romantic credo that life itself can and should be made into a work of art.

The reaction to this narrow dogma went into the opposite extreme, so that one believed that the bounds of art were limitless and its forms could incorporate anything. This belief overlooks the fact that art and its means have grown historically, that they are dependent not only on the state of general and artistic culture, but also on the contingencies of technical production. In short, it does not take into account that there is something one-sided, rudimentary and partial in aesthetic representation, so that it adds something beyond the unity and uniformity of nature. Aesthetic pantheism, which believes that every object is equally valuable and treatable, is a *megalomania* that ignores the relativity and the development of all forms of human activity. There is no equality before art as there is equality before nature.

The dependence of aesthetic representation on the conditions of its production means that its object appears differently according to how it is produced (184). Aesthetic representation is therefore not like a mirror which represents everything exactly as it appears in reality. Artistic creation, when it follows its own inner laws, has "a very unstable and contingent relation" to the reality it represents (184, 191). The difference between reality and its

31 See "Über ästhetische Quantität", *Zeitschrift für pädagogische Psychologie, Pathologie und Hygiene*, 3 (1903), 208–212, GSG VII, 184–189; and "Die ästhetische Quantität", *Der Zeitgeist, Beiblatt zum Berliner Tageblatt*, 30 März 1903, GSG VII, 190–200. These pieces have the same substantial content.

aesthetic representation is apparent from their different quantities or expanses (*Umfange*). The appearance of a mountain range—its huge masses—cannot be replicated easily in a work of art (191). Hence, Simmel explains, there are so few successful paintings of the Alps, which always seem empty and small compared to the original. Representation of organic objects is easier than inorganic, Simmel maintains, because we can empathize with the inner powers of the organic; but with inorganic things, which have no inner life, empathy is impossible, and for that reason it is difficult to represent them (192).

Simmel raises the question: How come models of a structure do not have the same aesthetic effect as the structure itself? (192) The answer, he thinks, is that we are not in a position to recreate physiologically or psychologically the dynamic interplay of weight, balance, support that make up the aesthetic stimulus of the real structure. Architecture is dead and meaningless for us if we cannot *feel* it; and because the models do not let us feel anything, they have no aesthetic effect upon us. Our feelings first arise *above* the natural size of the objects, which we can call "the threshold" (*die Schwelle*) of sensation; our normal sense organs are too crude to feel the pressures and counterpressures of a half-meter model, which do not reach the threshold of sensation (193). Our normal architecture has that amount of mass that will affect our physical-psychological structure; but too small or too large a mass, though we can perceive it, will not be aesthetically affective.

The aesthetic dimension of size is shown not only by the effect of magnifying or minimizing the art object but also by the reaction against depicting their natural size (193). A large painting of a horse in its natural size, for example, falls outside the sphere of a work of art. The interest in the real object then replaces that of art; it takes over all the meaning and special rights that would belong normally to a work of art. That aesthetic quality does not come from the form of an object alone—i.e., from the relations of its parts—is apparent from changes in its size; these changes affect aesthetic experience when the relations between the parts remain the same. A smaller version of an object will elicit an aesthetic response when its regular size will have no aesthetic effect (195).

Every element in a work of art has two quantitative thresholds: one within which it evokes an aesthetic reaction, and another beyond which it disappears (187, 196). These threshold phenomena appear in all aspects of life. There is a threshold for our consciousness of right, for example, because not every violation of the moral code elicits a reaction, e.g., the theft of a needle. Economic consciousness does not reach its threshold when only a small amount is spent; when, however, a large sum is spent, one quickly becomes disturbed. The aesthetic threshold of objects depends on the creativity and form-giving power of the artist.

Simmel says that investigations into this relationship have not progressed further than noting how aesthetic impressions depend on the quantity in

which a form is present (197). But this has only presented the problem, not solved it. One must seek the psychological factors that connect these factors, the size and aesthetic impressions. It is a very dilettantish perspective to hold that the meaning of a work of art is proportional to the quantity of feeling that it elicits. The feeling has to maintain a specific form in relation to tempo, rhythm, crescendo and decrescendo, and the quantity of these factors must not exceed a certain threshold if there is not just to be a mass of undifferentiated sensation having no aesthetic quality. This is especially apparent in literature when the tension of a novel exceeds the enjoyment, the strength of empathy and the distance the reader should have. The sheer quantity of the tension then overwhelms all aesthetic nuance and appreciation.

Another way in which the dimension of quantity enters aesthetic appreciation is regarding the size of the picture itself (198). It seems intuitive that meaningful and important events require a large picture frame, which would be a mistake for less meaningful and important events. The size of the picture should define our field of vision. If the central image does not fill all the picture, if other objects insinuate into the visual field, then they will prove distracting and diminish our concentration.

It is the last formula for all art that it appears to unite things, as if there were only one law for them, while they are in reality very different from one another (199). We demand of a portrait that it shows the sense and stimulus of external appearance, the play of light and shadow, the clarity of space, the balanced distribution of color spots—but also that it reveal the soul and inner mystery of the personality (199–200). What appears completely separate in life—the sensory quality of the appearance and its role as an interpreter of the soul—the work of art shows as an unbroken unity. It is as if there were one law governing both these realms—just like the sound of the verse and the meaning of its content have their unity in the lyric poem. The individual and the universal are opposed; but they overcome their opposition in the work of art. We find the same formula in the quantity of a work of art, which overcomes its opposing aspects as if it were through a pre-established harmony. It is the good fortune of a work of art that it seems to unite in one image the combination of its elements; but that unity is no fiction because the image is part of existence itself (200).

12.11 Caricature

It was part of Simmel's program to rethink classical aesthetics that he treated a topic that seemed to violate its most sacred precepts: caricature. Caricature appeared to contravene the basic rule of the imitation of nature, because the caricaturist deliberately depicted something unnatural; he distorted or exaggerated an object or person to make his point. By the same token, the caricaturist violated all requirements of beauty: his object was presented out

of balance and proportion. Yet caricature was becoming increasingly popular in the late 19th century: it could be found frequently in newspapers and magazines. It would have been absurd and extreme not to recognize it. Simmel turned to this task in a short article he wrote for the newspaper *Der Tag* in September 1916.[32]

Simmel begins his essay with the striking sentence: "Man is the born exceeder of limits" (*Der Mensch ist der geborene Grenzüberschreiter*) (244). This single sentence served as a full justification of the caricaturist: in exaggerating and exceeding the limits of nature, the caricaturist was acting in perfect conformity with *his* human nature. Having laid down this fundamental point, Simmel then explains the basic anthropology behind this human trait. As an exceeder of limits, he writes, man is unlike God or animal. God cannot go beyond his limits because he has none; and an animal cannot go beyond its limits because they are inherent in its nature. Yet the limits of a human being are different: they are breakable and infinitely extendible. We know that we are limited in our thinking and being, in our positive and negative value, in our will and power—but we also know that we are capable to see and go beyond these limits.

This anthropology lays down a fundamental principle of Simmel's *Lebensphilosophie*, which will later appear in 1918 as the chief theme of chapter 1 of Simmel's *Lebensanschauung*. There Simmel describes life as the power of self-transcendence.[33] It is characteristic of life that it both sets limits yet overcomes them. What Simmel is doing in this article is applying this doctrine to the caricaturist.

We are convinced, Simmel maintains, that all things have fixed limits, that every part within these limits has the same reality and the same rights (244). But in our perception of things, there is not always a perfect balance of elements. As soon as we approach one of them, a concrete being facing a concrete object, the uniformity of the elements disappears. Some elements are important, some are indifferent; we fix our attention on some, while others are passed over. Hence through our very perception of things we *exaggerate* some elements. We humans, from some inner law of our nature, are therefore exaggerating beings (245). Every way of feeling and willing within ourselves, every thought that extends into the chaos of things, left to itself, extends into infinity. There is in human beings a longing for infinity, a striving for the absolute. But this striving hits a limit when it encounters other human beings, who restrict its thoughts, desires and feelings.

32 "Über die Karikatur", *Der Tag*, Nr. 105, 27 Februar, 1917, Ausgabe A, Illustrierter Teil, Nr. 48, Berlin. GSG XIII, 244–251.

33 See chapter 11, section 3.

If exaggeration is a trait of our human nature, it becomes caricature when it takes place with consciousness or on purpose (246). Caricature is not any exaggeration; it takes place when a person, who has a multiplicity of traits and who has balanced them so that they form a unity, has one trait *one-sidedly* exaggerated. The natural measure for the balance and unity of the traits is still present; it has not become lost; but it has been broken. An all-sided exaggeration would not be a caricature. But when one trait is pushed out of proportion with the rest of the person's traits, then caricature appears. It is not the individual distortion that makes the caricature, but the lack of balance among its elements (247). It arises from a rigidity and a definitiveness of the extremes, when one part makes an unreconciled relation between part and whole. This is what makes the caricature a distortion (*Verzerrung*). There is a soft or good-humored caricature; it stands halfway and only momentarily denies the possibility of restoring balance. A hard vicious caricature, on the other hand, consists in its hardness; it makes the distortion part of the character allowing no possibility of a return to its normal form. The masters of hard caricature were Daumier, Goya, Aristophanes and Cervantes.

Simmel distinguishes caricature from literary stylization (247). If a sculptor or dramatist depicts a character trait with great intensity and firmness, even one which is not seen in normal experience, he does not necessarily engage in caricature as long as the depiction is consistent with the personality as a whole. For example, Molière's miser is a caricature because his extreme passion is set in the context of an otherwise normal human being; Richard III, however, is not a caricature because his crimes are of someone whose conduct is already excessive (248). If an abnormal character trait appears in a normal person, who has difficulty in controlling it, then that is material not for caricature but tragedy.

There is a scale of human traits surrounding caricature (248). If a one-sided transcendence of typical human limits is rooted in the basic powers of the person, whose whole being is extended to the corresponding dimensions, then we speak of a great human being. If a person cannot manage his one-sidedness, where his limits are too great to accommodate it within his whole personality, then we are talking about a tragic personality. But where we find an excessive trait on top of average limits—or where we are dealing with "too much" on top of "too little"—or where the person is simply too careless and abides in his limits—then we are dealing with caricature.

Simmel confesses he has not distinguished caricature from its deliberate, willed or literary forms. All these forms are really one. For they are all saying one thing: "You are in reality as you here appear in fiction" (249). This only goes to show, Simmel thinks, that the caricaturist is really imitating nature after all. Through the caricature we are drawing attention to what a person really is; the point of its distortion is to reveal what is really the truth.

Though the caricaturist would not readily admit it, he honors classical aesthetics in violating it.

Caricature is a magnifying class that we use to expose something that we often ignore, or oversee because out attention is directed elsewhere (249). Because its very nature is to overstep limits, caricature always runs the risk of going too far. Exaggeration can be exaggerated itself, as Simmel says (250). When caricature exceeds its own limits, Simmel writes, then life returns to set new limits which even the caricaturist obeys—until he needs to go beyond even them.

That there is caricature at all, Simmel claims, is the exaggeration of a chief character of our nature: that we exceed limits. This only goes to show, he concludes, "how deep it is rooted in the metaphysical basis of our nature" (251).

12.12 The Realm of Law

Simmel pondered another concept of the classical tradition in his article "Gesetzmässigkeit im Kunstwerk", which appeared in *Logos* in 1917/18, shortly after his death.[34] This concept was that of law or lawfulness. Simmel first gave a lecture on this title in Frankfurt in December 1917; he informed Eduard Bendemann that he planned to speak about "the latest art", calling the lecture "*Gesetzmässigkeit im klassischen und im modernen Kunstwerk*".[35] Yet Simmel's focus was on the concept of law or lawfulness in general; the article does not specifically mention either classical or modern art.

The concept of law was, of course, a mainstay of the classical tradition, a favorite topic of Wolff, Baumgarten, Gottsched and Winckelmann. Wolff, whose definition was authoritative for the entire rationalist tradition, defined the rule as the method by which we create order and perfection in a work of art; it gives the sufficient reason why something has to be so and cannot be otherwise.[36] If a rule is properly followed, then the artist creates perfection, which consists in unity in multiplicity. The perception of that perfection is nothing less than the experience of beauty.

This definition created problems and controversy. If the artist followed rules strictly and deliberately, would not the work of art seem perfunctory and mechanical? And is that not the very opposite of good art? Lessing and the *Sturmer und Dränger* (Hamann, Lenz and Klinger) thought so, and duly

34 "Gesetzmässigkeit im Kunstwerk" *Logos*, VII (1917/18) Heft 3, 213–223. GSG XIII, 382–394.

35 Textgeschichte, GSG XIII, 411. See Georg Simmel an Eduard von Bendemann, September 17, 1917, GSG XXIII, 830

36 See Wolff, *Ontologia* §§ 472–530 in *Werke* II/3, 360–412; and *Metaphysik*, §§ 132–175, *Werke* I/2, 68–94.

protested against the hegemony of rules in a work of art. Lessing argued that rules have to be specific to the artist's purpose and medium; the *Sturmer und Dränger* protested against all rules as counter to artistic genius.

Simmel's discussion picks up where the rationalists and *Sturmer und Dränger* left off. He begins, oddly enough, with a defense of laws (384). It is not given to us, he writes, to live from the simple reality of our nature. The basis for our existence would be too narrow, our relation to the world would be too dark, the elements of our inner existence would be too full of contradictions, if we had to live according to our drives and natural powers alone. A human being cannot live without the support of rules, without the help of laws. There must be laws in a twofold sense, Simmel explains. There must be *natural* laws that determine the conduct of things; and there must be *norms*, which determine how people *ought* to act. The first kind of laws determines *real* necessity; the second kind determines *ideal* necessity. Even an art work, as a product of nature, stands under the same natural laws that govern all events. But neither kind of necessity does justice to the necessity that we feel with a work of art, Simmel asserts. Just what that feeling, that special kind of necessity, is, Simmel now makes it his business to explain.

We judge a work of art in two ways, Simmel says (382). Either according to its ideal necessity, or what we call its idea, which is the inner vision of the artist; or according to a norm, which determines how the work should appear independent of the intention of the artist. Both kinds of evaluation apply an ideal or norm that comes from outside; both deal with a problem external to the work itself. Yet there is a third form of evaluation, Simmel argues, which is peculiar to works of art. Works of art are special because they set the norms and ideals by which they are to be judged; they set the problems which they attempt to solve. It is a complete misunderstanding when one sees the problem of the work of art as a general question or task which it is to answer or resolve. Shakespeare, when he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, did not set himself the task of describing the ideal lovers; Giorgione did not want to depict a beautiful woman when he painted his *Dresdener Venus*; and Beethoven did not intend to express joy in the final movement of this ninth symphony. All these artists only wanted to create their object in all its individuality; they wanted to establish it only in its singular perfection (383). There was no general ideal they were applying to a particular; rather, they were working from the particular toward the ideal within it.

A work of art is one of those rare gifts in life, Simmel writes, which satisfy a need in the moment they arouse it (384). We do not first feel a need and then search for a means to satisfy it; rather, we acquire the need through the experience of its satisfaction. We feel an urge to be redeemed by a work of art only when we have first felt redemption through it. It is as if a work were "fallen from heaven", Simmel writes. We do not know the intention of the artist; we do not bring any idea or demand to it, as if it had to fulfill them. It

is the work itself that offers us the criterion by which we should judge it. It is indeed often the case that we feel a work of art convincing and successful because it contradicts in the most blatant manner all the rules and norms that supposedly govern it (385).

Simmel attempts to clarify the evaluation of a work of art by contrasting it with morality (386). Morality lays down a universal law which the individual must satisfy as a condition of the moral worth of its action. The universal stands above the individual, which must be given, and which cannot be derived from it. But there is another kind of judgment completely distinct from morality, Simmel contends (387). This is where the universal is *within* the individual, where it is derived from the essence of the individual, that which makes it just this individual and nothing else. Here the individual contains the law that determines how it should be. Here, of course, Simmel was applying his concept of *individual law*, which he had explained in his *Lebensanschauung*.[37] The individual law, Simmel maintains, is "the only artistic criterion" (388).

Although Simmel offers no explicit explanation, his idea of the individual law provided him with this solution to the controversy about aesthetic norms. The conflict between the rationalists and the *Sturmer und Dränger* rested upon a false premise shared by both: they assumed that the norm or law had to be external to the individual, an abstract universal for which all its individual instances were contingent and indifferent. The rationalists affirmed that this kind of universal is applicable to art; the *Sturmer und Dränger* denied that it is applicable for art; but both shared the same concept of the universal. Simmel's unique position came from denying this concept of universality. He agreed with the rationalists that there is universality in a work of art; but he disagreed with their abstract concept of universality. He agreed with the *Sturmer und Dränger* that works of art should be freed from abstract universality; but he did not accept their conclusion that *all* universality should be banished from works of art. What allowed him to keep the universality of rules, but not to suffer the objection of heteronomy, was his idea that the norm or rule derive from the individual.

12.13 Fashion

One of Simmel's most famous and influential essays is that on fashion, "Zur Psychologie der Mode", which appeared in the weekly *Die Zeit* in 1895.[38]

37 See chapter 11, section 7.

38 "Zur Psychologie der Mode. Sociologische Studie", *Die Zeit*, V (1895) 22–24. GSG V, 105–114. Simmel returned to the topic ten years later in his *Die Philosophie der Mode*, in the series *Moderne Zeitfragen*, ed. Hans Landberg, No. 11. (Berlin:Pan Verlag, 1905). GSG X, 7–37. The content of both essays is substantially the same.

Though the title of the essay assigns it to the field of psychology, the subtitle corrects that impression: it states "Sociologische Studie". The essay is a perfect example of Simmel's belief that the most fleeting and inconsequential phenomena of social life illustrate the deepest concerns of a culture.

Fashion takes its origins, Simmel writes, from the physiological foundation of our being (105). That foundation consists in the alternation between rest and motion, receptivity and activity. More specifically, it consists in the interplay between opposites: between the striving for the greatest universality and for the greatest particularity; between the need to conform with others yet to be separate from them; between surrender to others and the desire to change them. Our psychic life is a constant struggle between these opposing powers which we strive to reconcile. Each of these powers strive for duration and persistence on the one hand and for change and alternation on the other hand.

There is a social dimension to all these powers. One side of them consists in the tendency to imitation (*Nachahmung*) (106). Imitation has the attraction of a purposive use of our powers which does not require great exertion; it can be done easily and frees us from personal responsibility and the difficulty of having to make a decision (*die Qual der Wahl*). Imitation corresponds to one direction of our social powers: that which aims for uniformity, for conformity with others, for stability in change. There is, however, another direction of our powers: that which seeks differentiation, individuality, change in stability. In biological terms, imitation is a form of psychological inheritance, while differentiation is a form of variation.

Fashion unifies these opposing directions of our powers (106). On the one hand, it fulfills the need for social support; it leads the individual along the path that all follow. On the other hand, it also satisfies the desire to be different, the tendency to differentiate oneself from others. Hence Simmel comes to the general conclusion: "*Fashion is a life form that seeks a compromise to the tendency to social equality and that to individual difference*" (107; Simmel's italics).

Behind fashion Simmel sees the striving for class differences. "Fashion is always class fashion", he writes (106). The higher classes want to distinguish themselves from the lower classes; the higher classes abandon a fashion as soon as they see the lower classes adopting it. Fashion indicates the desire to conform to those within the group; but also the desire to exclude those from a lower-standing group (107). But because those from a lower group strive to get ahead and above themselves, they strive to have the same fashions as the higher group; but then the higher group, to distinguish itself from the lower, changes its fashion.

When either of these elements is absent—the need to distinguish oneself or the need to imitate—then fashion disappears (108). If imitation is abhorred, if everyone strives to excel and to be different, then there is no

fashion. Simmel says that this happened in Florence around 1390 when there was no fashion in men's clothing. But if what was originally done by only a few is eventually done by everyone, then there is also no fashion. Fashion by its very nature is done by only a part of a group; the other part is not yet in fashion but only striving to be so. Fashion is therefore always in a state of becoming.

Fashion, Simmel remarks, is the playground for those individuals who are inwardly dependent and who need reassurance, yet whose self-feeling demands distinction, attention and award (109). It elevates the insignificant to a representative of the whole because he feels like he is supported by the spirit of the group. This is driven to an extreme by the fop or *fashionista*. He feels like he is ahead of the crowd though he is only doing the same as everyone else. Here we see what we often find in social life: the apparent leader is really the led (110).

Fashion has the ironic logic, Simmel notes, that it is possible to be fashionably unfashionable (110). The unfashionably fashionable has the same characteristics as the fashionable: the need to distinguish oneself and the need to conform, to be unalike and like everyone else; its just that the need to conform expresses itself through non-conformity. Non-conformity is then a type or form of conformity. One then belongs to the club of the non-conformists.

Simmel surmises that women strive for fashion more than men (110). He says this against his better conscience: for he notes that scientific caution demands that one should avoid judgments about women in the plural. Still, he ventures the judgment that women differ from men in that their nature consists in a lack of differentiation, in a stronger binding on the social average (111). This explains, he thinks, their close attachment to morals, their strong sense of propriety. Yet he still thinks that fashion offers women the same opportunity as men: they can still imitate others yet also distinguish themselves.

Sometimes, Simmel observes, fashion is only a mask used by sensitive and sophisticated people to protect themselves, to serve as a last reserve for their personal feeling and taste (111). The struggle between the drive for conformity and the drive for individuality is then taken within the individual soul itself (112). One develops a "personal style" which serves as a limit to social fashion. Here Simmel was writing about the "noble soul" which Nietzsche celebrates.

Fashion, as Simmel has explained it so far, takes place between the "higher" and "lower" classes. It has usually been the higher classes who are most moved by fashion, and who most quickly go through trends. The lower classes attach themselves more to the past, so that they are slower moving. Nowadays, though, it is the middle classes who are the most movable; the *tiers état* has taken the lead and the whole tempo of life has quickened. The moment in which the summit is reached is also that in which it begins to fall (113). When fashion attains its height it also reaches its point of death.

Although fashion is always fast and fleeting, it also seems that it is eternal (113). He who buys his furnishings according to the latest fashion, no longer thinks about that which was fashionable only two years ago. He does not want to recognize that the same fate will befall his new furnishings in just two years. What is eternal in fashion is that everything will soon become unfashionable. Fashion is eternal only in the general concept while all its individual variations will soon disappear.

What is exciting and piquant about fashion is precisely the contrast between its sudden spread and extension and its quick demise and disappearance; yet, at the same time, fashion makes a claim to a timeless validity (114). Its fascination lies no less in the narrowness in which it encloses a social circle, and yet how belonging to it is both its cause and its effect. It lies also in how it promotes imitation and frees the individual of all personal decision; yet it also encourages intensity and nuancing of style. Fashion is thus one of the social structures that guarantee that opposing streams of life come to their equal rights.

12.14 The Portrait

In his exploration of the different arts in the early 1900s Simmel finally landed on painting, more specifically portraiture. He laid out his views on this art in an article he wrote for the *Neue freie Presse* in 1905, "Aesthetik des Porträts".[39] The common view of portraiture made it a home of realism in the idea that a portrait should reflect the personality of a real human being. Simmel's essay is a critique of this assumption.

The task of the portrait, Simmel maintains, is to present the meaning of an *appearance*, but not the meaning behind the appearance. Of the whole human being, in which body and soul are bound together, it separates out what is visible, its visibility (*Sichtbarkeit*). From the manifold, wavering and not visible elements of a representation of an individual the portrait abstracts what we really see, or at least could see were our eyes sufficiently independent (322). This could also be done by a photograph; but it is not the appearance alone but its meaning that is in question, i.e., the right, the necessity, the meaning of every external feature in its relation to every other. Through shaping and shading, through foregrounding and backgrounding, through construction and choice of the viewpoint, the portrait must bring to complete clarity the character of the appearance as appearance.

In this way art differs from our usual picture of the world. When we normally explain one thing through others, we assume that there are powers

39 Professor Georg Simmel, "Aesthetik des Porträts", *Neue freie Presse*, April 22, 1905. GSG VII, 321–332.

behind them; we do not take into account their immediate surfaces but movements and energies which take place underneath them.

Within the realm of art, however, there is a completely different kind of necessity. When we see one line of an arabesque, for example, we feel that a certain continuation is necessary and another contingent; or when we a color we feel that only others combine with it. This necessity of seeing only one line or color as necessary is not a matter of logic or of causality; rather, it is a purely *intuitive* necessity (322–323). And so in a face we feel that only certain features go together, viz., that this mouth is necessary with this nose, that these go with this forehead and cheeks. Their compatibility is entirely a matter of feeling; we cannot explain this necessity conceptually. The feeling has to do with the *sui generis* laws of intuition, which are completely independent of whether they express any forces or causes underneath them.

Nevertheless, Simmel admits that this interpretation of a work of art will satisfy no one (323). The demand that a portrait exhibit the soul through the body is still legitimate. It is still necessary to explain the secret that the relations of form of the visible, whose depiction is the whole immediate business of art, are still something more and are not exhausted by the laws of the surface of things. Nevertheless, the popular opinion that the appearance of human beings in art is only a hieroglyphic, whose meaning is not in itself but in its spiritual content, is a mistake. Such a belief stems only from the prerogative that the soul claims over our practical interests, for which the body is only an instrument or tool. But, for art, this denigrates its proper business and ability to the role of a mere means. Instead of achieving something incomparable and unique, art becomes a mere branch of psychology.

What art brings to life consists in the very reverse of the practical relationship between body and soul (324). Portraiture uses the connection between body and soul, which makes one the symbol of the other, so that its material, the appearance of a human being, achieves unity, form and clarity. In direct opposition to the practice of life, *it interprets the external side of the human being through its inner side* (325) (Simmel's italics). That is the great deep fortune of art, which only art can give, that the purest, most complete and transparent picture of our appearance, considered only as an appearance and the laws of aesthetic perception, is also that which the soul presents behind appearances in the most impressive and unambiguous way. If the unity of a face means that its every feature is necessarily determined by every other, this interaction is condensed in the unity of the soul, just like the political unity of citizens is reflected in the unity of the state, or the unity of the faithful is reflected in the unity of their religion. The success of making an exposition of the intuitability of a human being can be measured by the ability of a portrait to convince us of the soul of this human being.

But whence comes this parallelism of these orders, which are independent in their essence (325)? What is the secret connection that joins the pure

intuitability of the human appearance with the revelation of the unintuitable? For the artist and the spectator the secret can and should remain; for exactly because the connection is missing the concordance will appear as a great good fortune, as if art graces us with a harmony of the world elements which must be forever strange for the understanding. But we must attempt to shed some light on this darkness, however many media must break its light, and however weak it achieves its goal.

Simmel's explanation for this parallelism is that there is really not two orders at all: the soul or personality that we see behind the portrait is really a construction of our own intellect which we project onto the canvas. That this is Simmel's explanation becomes clear when he reminds us of some basic principles of Kantian epistemology: that all unity in appearances is the work of the understanding, whose main function is to synthesize the material of sense (326). The unity, lawfulness and organization of appearances all refer to nothing behind the appearances, Simmel tells us, but only to the spectator himself, who has constructed this unity, lawfulness and organization. What the artist does is make this construction intuitable, revealing to the intellect its activity through sense. As Simmel explains: "There is no need for the artist to make a psychological inference from the outer to the inner of things, which practice demands; for his domain and final purpose lies not in the innerness of things but in its outerness: the artist's working through of the intuitable, i.e., the production of its necessary connections, its felt unity, is nothing other than making the soul intuitable… (328).

Simmel's target is the realism that infects in the common explanation of portraiture. We think that we can perceive a soul behind the appearances of the portrait, that the portrait is good just to the extent that it reveals a likeness to a real person resembling the features painted on the canvas. Sure enough, he calls this explanation "*logische Realismus*" (331). Against this explanation, Simmel writes: "The portrait, as an intuitable picture of the intuitability of a human being, can only develop this intuitability, and to the most perfect expression of soulfulness (*Seelenhaftigkeit*); but this development can take place only in the direction of appearance and not through a deviation or a heterogeneous addition for the sake of a soul that is not even symbolized by this appearance" (331).

The final sentence of Simmel's essay neatly sums up its whole message: "The *meaning* of an appearance belongs in a painting when it reveals itself as the meaning of an *appearance*" (332).

12.15 The Face

Years before Simmel wrote about portraiture, he wrote about its subject: the human face. This appears in a short essay he wrote in 1901 "Die ästhetische

Bedeutung des Gesichts", which appeared in 1901 in the Hamburg weekly *Die Lotse*.[40] In its content and themes this article is largely independent of the later one on portraiture.

In this short essay Simmel wants to explain the role of the human face in the fine arts. It is said that the face is the clearest expression of the form of the soul. Simmel accepts this common saying; but he want to know what perceptible features of the face make it such a transparent expression of the soul? He also wants to investigate the other qualities of the face that are important for a work of fine art (36).

Simmel begins by explaining how the face is the expression of the soul or spirit (36). The mark of the soul or spirit is that it unifies the multitude of elements in the world into a unity. It unifies the multitude of things in space and time into the unity of an image, a concept or a sentence. A whole appears spiritual the more its parts refer to one another, the more they show themselves to interact and depend on one another; hence a living organism, with the interdependence of all its parts, is the preliminary stage of the spirit. Within the human body the face is the most extreme measure of this unity. The proof of this is that a change in one element of the face changes its whole character and expression. A twitching of the lips, a wrinkling of the nose, a frown of the brow all betray the whole soul. There is no self-enclosed part of the soul, as if it could be isolated from the effect of changes in other parts; even the slightest change of one part can ruin the aesthetic effect of the whole. The unity of the face is heightened by how the head sits on the neck; it stands like an island relative to the rest of the body, and so seems to refer more to the face (37).

The human face, Simmel maintains, matches our most fundamental aesthetic ideals (37). Within the perceptible world, there is no structure that reveals a greater multiplicity of forms united into a greater unity than the human face. The human countenance shows the ideal of human harmony: the greatest possible individualization of elements joined in the greatest possible unity. If there were no such unity, the great variety of forms of the human face would be something abstruse and aesthetically unbearable.

Simmel tries to explain the conditions under which the face presents a pleasing appearance (38). To be aesthetically enjoyable and effective, it is essential that the parts of the whole are enclosed in narrow limits. The parts must appear joined together; their separation appears ugly, because it seems that the spirit is losing its dominance over the whole. The elongated gestures of baroque figures, which seem to show them breaking apart, are ugly

40 Georg Simmel, "Die ästhetische Bedeutung des Gesichts", *Die Lotse*, Jahrgang 1, Band 2 (June 1, 1901), pp. 280–284. GSG VII, 36–42.

because they seem to disavow the power of the ego to hold together a form. Fortunately, the structure of the face makes such centrifugality, i.e., despiritualization, almost impossible. The face seems less susceptible to the forces of gravity, because it keeps its shape under so many circumstances. Where gravity appears to take place, viz., drooping eyelids, the drowsy sinking head, the aesthetic effect is not so pleasing because our spirit seems less in control.

The human being is not the bearer of its spirit like a book is the bearer of its spiritual content; it is not an indifferent receptacle for any contents. The spirituality of a human being consists in the form of its individuality (38). That the face is a symbol not only of the spirit but also of an unmistakable personality is owing to the concealment or disguise of the body, an idea that has been especially favored by Christianity. The face was the heir of the body, which, to the degree nakedness ruled, played a role in the expression of individuality (39). But the body's powers in this respect were less than those of the face. At first bodies could be distinguished by the sharpened eye no less than faces; but they did not *signify* these differences as well as the countenance. Of course, the individual personality is bound with the body; but *what* it is as a personality cannot be determined by the body but only by the countenance. Perhaps the body can express the movements of the soul as well as the face; but it is only in the face that these movements solidify into definite shapes once and for all. The fleeting beauty that we call grace must renew itself constantly in the movements of the hand, in the inclination of the upper body, in the lightness of step; it does not leave behind any lasting crystallizing form. The face, however, stamps the reactions that are typical for the individual. Through its characteristic malleability the face becomes, insofar as it is visible, the geometric place of the inner personality. Christianity has become the school for the awareness of human individuality insofar as it has limited the appearance of individuality to the face.

Beside its formal means of expressing individuality, the face has other aesthetic qualities though they serve an opposing principle (39). Since the face consists in two equal halves, it acquires a moment of rest and balance that softens the excitement and pointedness of pure individuality. The incomparability of the individual characteristics find their opposite in the balancing of the comparability of the two sides of the face. Symmetry is an anti-individualistic trait insofar as each side of the face is inferable from the other, and insofar as they refer to a higher principle that they have in common (40). Since it forms the two halves of the face symmetrically, sculpture has a more generalizing and typical style; painting has a more individualizing style because it sees the differences in the two halves through their profile and light and shadow. The face is the most remarkable synthesis of the formal principles of symmetry and individualization; as a whole it realizes the principle of individualization; and through the relation of its parts it realizes the principle of symmetry.

The aesthetic character of an object depends on how much a change in its parts determines a change in its whole impression (40). An object is more aesthetic, in its effects and applications, the more the whole reacts from the smallest of its elements; for such a reaction shows a fineness and strength in the composition of its parts. If aesthetic contemplation annuls the indifference of things, which is characteristic of the theoretical standpoint, then those objects will be most favorable to its view which wipe out all indifference between their parts and where the fate of each part depends on the others. The face achieves this task in the most perfect manner because a minimum of change in a part gives a maximum of change in the whole impression. For the problem of all art—to make the elements of form comprehensible to one another, to interpret the intuitable through the intuitable—nothing is more apt than the face, because its every feature is connected with every other. The cause and effect of this is the uncommon malleability of the face where the influence of even the smallest motion arouses the impression of potential changes in its whole composure. The apex of great changes in emotional effect from the smallest motion is most visible from the eye. There is nothing that affects greater changes from lingering in place than the eye: it bores into someone, it flies back, it circles a space, it wanders about, it grasps behind a desired thing and it attracts it. There is need for an investigation how the artist suits the direction, intensity, and the form of the gaze to divide a space and to make it comprehensible.

12.16 The Picture Frame

What is the aesthetic significance of the picture frame? Should it play a mere ancillary role to the picture itself which deserves all our attention? Or should it be part of the art work itself, so that picture and frame are parts of a total art work? These were questions much debated in the late 19th century. The *art nouveau* movement stressed the importance of making the picture frame part of a total work of art. If the whole world is to be a work of art, following the romantic ideal, the picture frame cannot be excluded; it cannot be a plain holder or simple retainer of the work of art; such an assumption works on the premise that there is something beyond and outside art itself.

The picture frame was no side issue for Simmel; it was crucial in defining his whole attitude toward late romanticism and *art nouveau*. He explained his views on it in a short essay, "Der Bildrahmen. Ein ästhetische Versuch", which appeared in the newspaper *Der Tag* in November 1902.[41]

41 Georg Simmel, "Der Bildrahmen. Ein ästhetischer Versuch". *Der Tag*, Nr. 541, 18 November, 1902. GSG VII, 101–108.

Simmel begins his essay with a seemingly banal point: that the character of everything depends on whether it is a part or a whole (101). This is also the question whether the existence of something is self-sufficient, enclosed within itself, or whether it is only one member of a whole which gives it its meaning and purpose. Such a distinction is illustrated by a work of art and something in nature. As a part of nature, everything is in connection with something else outside it; it is a transition point of energies and materials which are comprehensible only as parts of a wider whole. But the essence of a work of art is to be a whole unto itself, having no connection with anything outside itself; every one of its threads returns to its center. Since the work of art is a unity, it appears self-sufficient, depending on nothing outside itself. The borders of a natural thing are therefore very different from a work of art: in a natural thing, borders mark a place of constant exomorphis and endomorphis; but in the work of art, they mark, in one act, indifference and resistance toward everything outside itself, and the unifying enclosure of everything inside itself.

The picture frame symbolizes and strengthens this double function of a work of art (101). It excludes the spectator and the environment from the work of art itself; it therefore places the work at a distance in which it is aesthetically enjoyable. The inner unity of a work of art means that it is removed from all immediate life. It is only because the work of art has this self-sufficiency that it has so much to offer us. This self-sufficiency is its stepping back (*Anlaufrückschritt*) from us, but it is just by means of this that it works on us so deeply.

The properties of the picture frame are helps and embodiments of the inner unity of the picture (102). Something so apparently accidental as the joints between its sides is important because they draw attention to the center of the picture. The unifying effect of the joints is strengthened by heightening the external sides of the frame against the internal sides, so that the four sides form a converging surface. For the same reason one common practice nowadays is reprehensible: heightening the internal sides of the frame, which makes the frames fall away from the center. In this way the view is led outward, so that the cohesiveness of the picture suffers from a centrifugal distraction.

It serves more the attractive than the repulsive function of the sides if they are enclosed in two strips (*Leisten*). Then the whole profile or ornamentation of the frame appear like a stream between two shores. This favors the island-like position that the artwork needs toward the outside world. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the drawing of the frame facilitates this continuous stream of sight so that it appears to flow back on itself. The frame should never offer a gap or a bridge through which the world enters or leaves. This is what happens when the content of the picture is extended to the frames, fortunately a rare mistake but one which completely negates the self-sufficiency of the art work and the meaning of the frame (103). The

self-enclosing stream of the frame does not mean that its ornaments should flow parallel to it; on the contrary, to emphasize the flow of the frame that makes the picture into an island the lines of the ornament should be perpendicular to it. All lines at a diagonal to the flow form dams, whose power and motion increase the pleasure in the overcoming of such obstacles.

The purpose of a frame shows the impermissibility of a material frame (*Stoffrahmen*). A piece of material would be perceived as a piece of a wider material, so that it would seem that there is no inner reason that the pattern is just at this place; it would seem to refer to an unlimited continuation; hence the frame would no longer have its enclosing and concluding function (104).

The principle that the frame should enclose an aesthetic space explains why photographs of nature are no longer found in frames (104). A frame is appropriate only for a structure of an enclosed unity, which never appears in nature. Every section of nature is connected with a thousand spatial, physical, conceptual and sentimental ties with what surround it. Only the form of art severs these relations and inwardly connects them. A frame contradicts the feeling we have that a piece of nature is a part of a greater whole.

Another misunderstanding of the picture frame is a derivative of the sins of modern furniture (104). The principle that a piece of furniture is a work of art has removed much tastelessness and banality; but it should not be pushed too far. The work of art is for itself; but a piece of furniture is for us. The work of art has a sphere for itself; it is like an island in the world which waits until we come and see it. But the piece of furniture is something we touch; it protrudes into our world; it has no rights to be for itself. It is a hypertrophy of the modern sense of individuality when one hears furniture praised for its individuality. It is the same mistake when one claims that the picture frame, because of its ornaments, symbolism and contour, has an aesthetic value in itself (105). This fails to see how the frame serves the picture. Just as the body which serves the soul cannot be a soul itself, so the frame for a work of art cannot be the work of art itself.

Simmel concedes that old picture frames appear to contradict the frame's mere ancillary role (106). The sides of the old frames are like pillars of columns which carry a cornice or gable, their every part is much more differentiated and meaningful than their modern counterparts, whose four sides are replaceable with one another. That the parts are interdependent helps them to enclose the space to the greatest degree; but that gives them an organic life and weight that competes with their function as a mere frame. This is defensible as long as the aesthetic unity of the picture itself is not sufficiently strongly felt.

Simmel locates the evolution of the picture frame into a broader cultural development of modern life whereby the mechanical and schematic replaces the originally organic and independent (106–107). What was once self-sufficient and independent has become encompassed by a broader whole in

which it becomes only a part. This development can be seen in the transformation of the medieval knight into a modern soldier, the independent craftsman into a factory worker, the community into part of the modern state, domestic production into part of the money-economy and world market. In a similar way the picture frame has progressed from an aesthetic unity for itself into a uniform and mechanically produced commodity. Simmel sees here a predicament of the art work in the modern world. It is only part of a whole but it claims to be a whole itself; that repeats the general difficulty of life itself: that elements of a whole want to be autonomous and wholes themselves.

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