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Simmel, Goethe and the Question of Form. Or: the Value of Morphology[1]

Abstract. *This brief contribution aims to focus Simmel's filtration of goethean morphology. More specifically, here we think that it could be assumed: a) that Simmel implicitly characterized his social studies through a morphological method; b) that this method can be traced back to Goethean studies of natural philosophy. In order to prove it, we take into account: Simmel's* The Philosophy of Money*,* Sociology*,* Kant and Goethe *and* Goethe*; some goethean passages about natural philosophy. Firstly, we present some theoretical suggestions related to Goethe's morphology; secondly, we give a look to Simmel's morphological approach involved into the study of society. In the end, we draw some conclusions that arise from this comparison.*

Introduction

It is well known that the relationship between form and content constitutes one of the fundamental themes in the history of Western philosophy. In the field of biology, we find it in Goethe's writings on natural philosophy, part of a theoretical and epistemological project aimed at elaborating a morphology as the science of forms and a discipline devoted to the study of living organisms; consequently, to the study of the forms that characterize their appearance and functions. Goethe conceived an "intelligibility" of nature that differed from the theories of contemporary biologists,

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who were aligned with the taxonomic classification of the Linnean school, which he, while aware of the results brought to the world of biology, did not accept without reservation. As a matter of fact, according to Goethe the Linnean decompositional, taxonomic and classificatory method constituted−despite its valuable contribution to the history of biology − a too rigid and falsely ordered view of nature. In this regard, the Italian philosopher Paola Giacomoni writes: "But Linnaeus did not seek form, the *Gestalt* in nature, not the transformation of related patterns, not the variation of recurring themes, and then his order, though so revered, was not enough" (Giacomoni, 1993: 120)[2]. Still on the subject of Linnaeus, in the short text titled *Vorträge uber die drei ersten Kapitel des Entwurfs einer allgemeinen Einleitung in die vergleichende Anatomie, ausgehend von der Osteologie* Goethe would write, "It is therefore not a matter of merely considering the parts in their coexistence side by side, but of identifying their mutual, living influence, their mutual dependence and action [...] the form itself [...] must be produced and determined by a play of mutual influences" (See Goethe, 1952/66: 278).

For the study of the relationship between Simmel and Goethe, a valuable contribution among other was provided by Paola Giacomoni's essay *Classicità e frammento. Georg Simmel goethiano* (See Giacomoni, 1995), which provides abundant evidence of the fundamental influence Goethe's works had on Simmel's often misunderstood education. Giacomoni writes that Simmel was a good connoisseur of Goethe's entire oeuvre, that he "read with passion and boundless admiration from his earliest years" (Giacomoni, 1995: 11), to the point that he included "Goethe's Philosophy" among the topics proposed for his 1885 lecture-test at the University of Berlin. So, "if many interpreters have emphasized Simmel's philosophical debt to Nietzsche or Bergson, as well as, of

[2] This and the forthcoming translations from Italian and German are mine.

course, to Kant, not as many have grasped the philosophical importance for Simmel of the figure of Goethe" (Ibidem).

Goethe and morphology: between epistemology and the world of living nature

Goethe was first interested in botanical and zoological studies as early as the 1870s, following his appointment as superintendent of mines and forests by the Duke of Weimar (See Steigerwald, 2002). From that time and continuing for the next ten years, Goethe devoted part of his time to the study of mineralogy, anatomy and botany, forging relationships with professors at the University of Jena. These were the years when he began to develop his own conception of organic life and its manifestations.

Unlike the scientific approaches in vogue at the time, Goethe believed that nature should be studied in its changing appearances, dwelling on visible features. Such a phenomenological approach contrasted with the eighteenth-century mechanistic science, which, as a legacy of the Galilean scientific revolution and its fundamental conception of nature as a "book composed in mathematical characters" (the translation of which is up to the man of science), operates by unveiling the animating laws of bodies and phenomena, concealed by their visible surface. Goethe, on the contrary, advocated a conception of living beings that characterized them as pervaded by an order that manifests itself harmoniously between inside and outside: he thus comes to develop a naturalistic perspective that, recalling a famous aphorism from *Maximen und Reflexionen* (Goethe, 1952/66: 687-772), is not interested in what lies behind phenomena but in their direct manifestation: the natural phenomenon is always animated by a harmonic principle that has direct formal expression.

In the case of living beings, this principle is *life*. What constitutes the favorite object of Goethean biological studies consists in the peculiar ways through which life manifests itself as the principle and creative force of living natural reality, being concerned "exclusively

with what is visible [...] only about the laws or rules of what is perceptible" (Giacomoni, 1993: 12). The attempt to elaborate a morphology as a science of the natural totality corresponds precisely to the attempt to scientifically legitimize a perspective that reconciles the diversity of living beings with the order of which they are a part and that, above all, expounds the rules of the visible living without necessarily explaining it analytically.

It is thus possible to say that Goethe came to morphology (coining the word itself) in an attempt to devise a method that would be guaranteed to find meaning in the succession, transmutation and diversity of living forms. The discovery of the intermaxillary bone in humans in 1784 and Goethe's first trip to Italy (1786-87) constitute the events that allow him to consolidate this vision. From botanical observations made in Padua and Palermo and from anatomical investigations carried out on skulls of different species, he concludes that the common presence of the same element (and therefore of the same form) represents the confirmation of his original impressions; namely, that nature constitutes a total dimension between whose parts there is a demonstrated and demonstrable agreement, starting from the presence (under different forms) of common parts (in the case of plants the leaf, for animals the intermaxillary bone). The isolation of such an invariant[3] in addition to undermining a conception of man as a privileged being of nature, becomes preparatory to making a comparison

3 According to Paola Giacomoni this is the further sense through which the Goethean concept of *Urphänomen* should be read: "that which in varying [...] appears constant" (Giacomoni 1993: 17). It parallels the sense triggered by the concept of which the word is the bearer: that of a phenomenon (intense as an element that visibly manifests itself) that is archetypal and primal in the living that influences all subsequent development and metamorphosis. However, according to the author, Goethe will abandon this conception because of preferences toward a purely morphological-metamorphic and not ontogenetic theory of forms (See Giacomoni, 1993: 92).

between specimens of different living species that is not dictated by arbitrariness.

Thus, all morphological manifestations contribute to the constitution of a natural cosmos whose variety only empirically attests to the different ways in which living beings present a certain form or are subject to a certain metamorphosis. The fact that an organism evolves by developing a certain form does not open up any criteria for differentiation or any inadequacy; rather, it constitutes the expression of a certain peculiarity corresponding to what is required of that being by its own life process. The dynamism of life does not predispose any maintenance as necessary, no compulsory preservation of the physiological conditions or initial morphological manifestations of organisms; on the contrary, it constantly pushes to stimulate the metamorphic process of the living, whose mutations are inscribed within a plan that knows no criteria of falseness, rightness, or adequacy. Goethean gnoseology, consequently, pertains to a total conception of being for which Goethe explicitly draws inspiration from Spinoza. The fragments that make up such a totality of the natural cosmos (which also embraces the dimension of the human) are perfectly harmonized with each other.

This is the reason why the classical epistemological distinction between subject and object becomes almost meaningless in Goethe. There can be no existence separate from the world, in the same way that one cannot identify a figure separate from a background. In Goethean epistemology the particularity of the subject accords with the universality of the object outlining a type of relationship devoid of dichotomies or hierarchies, but full of different parts of a single, multiform cosmos. From this unified dimension emerges the value of the process that characterizes the entire natural world, namely life. The metamorphosis (i.e., the perpetual changing of forms through and by means of life) that characterizes the existences of all living things acts as a bridge between the particular and the universal. The link that by analogy unites (or distinguishes) the forms of the living, expresses the continuity between the whole and

its parts. The turnover of forms is guaranteed by their plasticity and characterizes the development of every living thing and, consequently, its evolution.

In Goethe's intentions, therefore, morphology comes to constitute a scientific method which, by paying attention to the changes and transformations of the same form, succeeds in bringing to light sequences and connections among the various living beings. Therefore, it is of great usefulness and importance to study them in their ongoing existence, making sure to grasp the dynamism of life processes through the observation of their empirical and visible manifestations. It is also vital to avoid proceeding as in comparative anatomy, which – through the separation of the various parts of living beings and their *post-mortem* decomposition (in some ways indispensable, as Goethe's own studies show) – can only partially grasp all the particularities of the *Lebenswelt* which, as such, are only manifested by living. For Goethe, anatomy is not sufficient in itself, like all sciences that proceed by methods of decomposition. They fail in making visible the unity of the manifold and in revealing that orderly succession among the living that characterizes the harmonious world of life.

Simmel and the study of social forms

We now need to briefly summarize the theoretical-sociological orientation advanced by Simmel. The first text useful for this purpose is the essay *The Problem of Sociology*, which first appeared in 1894 and was republished in 1908 as the first chapter of *Sociology*. In this text Simmel articulates his contribution to the search for an epistemological foundation for social studies, about which the cultural and academic galaxy of Wilhelminian Germany was explicitly skeptical (See Lepenies, 1988). Nonetheless, it seems that Simmel sensed very early on the crucial role that the development of a science of society could play for an effective hermeneutics of modernity. The first step was to circumscribe the epistemological

problems related to this question. In fact, if it was clear that the task of a sociology was encapsulated in the study and investigation of that dimension of human-associated life, still strongly ignored in its dynamics, manifestations, and characteristics, at the same time, how to accomplish this task was still open to question. To become a science, sociology needed to be supported by a stable theoretical structure, to establish an adequate vocabulary, and to circumscribe specific objects. All of this represented a particularly heartfelt challenge on the part of Simmel, in whose intentions sociology was to be constituted not only as a *critical consciousness of modernity*, but also (and above all) as an "inquiry into the modes and cognitive structures of the subject investigating social reality" (Ruggieri, 2014: 28). Therefore, understanding the problems of *statu nascendi* sociology meant first of all coming to delineate the "conditions that make the social as such possible" (Ruggieri, 2014: 28.)

Such "conditions of possibility of the social" are identified by Simmel by means of two fundamental concepts, which highlight his distancing himself from all those theories that presuppose a certain "fixity" of the social datum (or fact), which for Simmel can be grasped only in a dynamic vision capable of embracing at once the *subjective dimension* of human actions and the *objective dimension* of the social facts they concretize. The integration of these two dimensions occurs through one of the afore mentioned concepts: reciprocal action (*Wechselwirkung*). This constitutes an *a priori* of society, the root of the mutual dependence existing between the individual dimension of the *Self* and the collective dimension of the *Other*. Only the products of the mutual interaction between these two spheres constitute the material on which sociology is called to work.

Such products of interaction are ordered by Simmel by means of the form-content relationship. The interaction between the individual and the collective and between Self and Other give rise to structures with an apparently fixed character that crystallize a range of ways in which each individual relates to and interacts with his or her peers. These structures, represented by a wide range of group actions and behaviors, are gathered under the concept of

form by Simmel and termed, therefore, social forms. The living matter of sociology, that is the products with which it is called upon to deal, are constituted, therefore, by all those modes through which mutual action between man and man is made explicit. Over time, such inter-actions are fixed in customs and traditions, elements of a cultural universe that results from the crystallization of innumerable interactional practices. These manifest themselves in a variety of forms of association (*Vergesellschaftung*), which sociology is called upon to investigate. Only everything that takes place within a society constitutes its content; but only everything through which it manifests itself constitutes its forms. This is the sense by which Simmel introduces the concept of form in sociology.

Simmelian sociology thus comes, through the study of forms, to represent itself as a science akin to geometry (the science of pure forms) that investigates the problematic nature of the relationship between subject and object, aimed at searching the causes of their lack of congruence; it digs into the furrow, the discrepancy, the distance between the self, that is, the individual psychic content, and the social form that crystallizes the ways in which this self relates to other selves.

Therefore, it is only from the surface of social phenomena, from the observable concreteness of their perpetual and constant change, that sociology can hope to arrive at an understanding of them. The surface constitutes the most authentic dimension of reality, in which lies the passage that leads to an understanding of the dynamics and processes that characterize society. According to Simmel, therefore, every observable social phenomenon is decomposable into a form and content that constitute a unitary reality. It is by inserting itself into the problematic relationship between internal (content) and external (form) that sociology assumes legitimacy by proposing itself as a *science of social forms and their developments* with the goal of reuniting the observation of phenomena with a general theory capable of explaining their existence and transformation while avoiding abstract cataloguing.

The realization of this epistemological project was fully realized in 1908 with the publication of *Sociology*, but its features can also be recognized in the better known *The Philosophy of Money*, within which Simmel describes and analyzes all the psychological processes underlying the lives of the inhabitants of the modern metropolis. We have previously highlighted how Simmel understood the concept of social form as a crystallized product of the mutual association between individuals in the social context. It becomes evident how the *The Philosophy of Money* follows this conception the moment we realize that money represents the most accomplished social form of modernity. The rise of money from a simple medium of exchange to the absolute object of human beings's desire is part of a process that transcends individual existence and encompasses the whole of society *tout-court*; the fact that money has become the regulator of human beings's existences can be traced to two important dynamics: the inversion of the *means-end* relationship and that of the *subject-object* relationship. The former corresponds to the inability on the part of modern men to recognize an adequate distinction between the goal of desire and the means of achieving it; in other words, the human beings of modern society take part in the phantasmagoria they themselves have set up, whereby the universal medium of exchange becomes the goal, the ultimate end of existence.

It becomes clear how this dynamic also involves the relationship between subject and object; through such phantasmagoria, the humans of modern society lose sight of their primary ontological status, given by the fact that they are living subjects and therefore capable of carrying out a level of existence that is superior to biological life. The human subject, insofar as he lives and experiences what Simmel would later call "more-life" (*Mehr-Leben*), has within himself the faculty to direct his own existence through the identification of ends and purposes that are not rigidly imposed by his own physiological constitution, as in the case of other living

beings[4]. What makes a man fully a subject is precisely this ability to direct himself toward the goal he chooses to attempt. But the Simmel inhabitant and spectator of the modern metropolis realizes that this ontological connotation is gradually ceasing to belong to human beings, whose existence is increasingly dominated, characterized, and directed by the dimension of objects, including money. In the life of modern society, the degree of conditioning that material objects hold *vis-à-vis* spiritual subjects gradually becomes more and more manifest, to such an extent that they usurp their place and constitute themselves as the main protagonists of modern life.

It is evident from these considerations how money becomes for Simmel a social form in its own right; to be more precise, money becomes *the matrix that imprints its forms on social life*. At the same time, it constitutes the formalized and crystallized expression of all those attitudes, those ways of being of human beings in social life based on relations of mutual utility. In a sense, money constitutes form giving (or co-forming).

The point of arrival of Simmelian sociology as an accomplished and realized science of social forms is given by the *Sociology*. We use the expression "point of arrival" since it is first and foremost a work that corresponds to what we might call "the second theoretical moment of Simmel's sociology". In fact, if the first aimed at giving an epistemological foundation to sociology and defining the original conditions of existence of a society (identified in the *Wechselwirkung*), this second period aims, in full relevance to the biologist Goethe, at the presentation of the results following the application of a social morphology capable of describing (and concatenating) the characteristics of those social, cultural and human forms of modern

[4] Simmel as a reader of Nietzsche and Bergson - that is, the vitalist thinker who, especially in his later writings, will give great prominence to the theme of life and its creative capacity to shape human existences - begins to peep out here.

society. *Sociology* constitutes the systematic exposition of what Simmel considered to be the most important and characteristic[5] *Vergesellschaftungen* (associations) of modern times. The poor, space, contrast, and stranger, constitute phenomenal forms of a reality incapable of interpreting them, and thus of interpreting itself. Each of the parts through which social reality makes itself visible (through forms) needs to be explained bearing in mind the fact that these constitute the objective product of the social relations existing among human beings. If for the early Simmel society presented itself as a dimension to be posited, now the point of view turns out to be reversed: society is already presupposed and the purpose of *Sociology*'s morphological investigation arises from the need to explain it within its characteristics, not to theoretically prove its existence. Society constitutes a multiform set of existences and phenomena that give rise to a qualitatively (not quantitatively) determinable unique composition. Simmel's attention to the forms of social life enhances not only the morphological sensibility that characterizes his investigation, but also the phenomenological one, whereby the (social) whole is given by the actual manifestation of each of its (individual) constituents in reciprocal relation to other constituents.

The portraits composed by *Sociology* are, in this sense, unique. The thoroughness and accuracy Simmel brings to bear in the chapters devoted to the poor and the stranger constitute the fulfillment of his social hermeneutics. Characteristically, there appears to be a dualism that inhabits every social form, which,

[5] We use this expression on the one hand because it is normal to imagine that Simmel could not (or even did not want to) devote further energy to dealing with additional social forms than those already presented and described in *Sociology*. On the other hand, it is important to consider, beyond the description and analysis of forms accomplished by Simmel, the fundamental methodological contribution of this work: it translates into a fact that "way of observing by forms" that also represented Goethe's intention in the field of natural studies, contributing in no small measure to the development of those methods of sociological investigation that had great development in American sociology (See Silver&Brocic, 2021).

although generated by an unconscious mass of reciprocal actions between individuals, always involves the human beings whose identity is contested between the sociologist's categorization and the characterization of their own selves. Hence one of the fundamental traits isolated by Simmel: the poor and the stranger constitute two antinomian forms of society, the occupants of a limbo, of a sphere whose volume is never quite quantifiable. They are at once on the outside and on the inside of collectivity; their foreignness to society is nothing but "only a particular form of being inside" (Simmel, 2009: 435), just as their belonging to it constitutes a particular form of the "outside". Poor and stranger are at once subject and object of the social totality, parts of the whole insofar as the whole is revealed in its parts.

In his later writings (See Simmel, 1997a; 1197b; 1989-2015 [1913b]), where sociological themes will gradually give way to the philosophy of life, Simmel will emphasize, from a Nietzschean perspective, how the creation of forms constitutes an operation that is always subject to a problematic relationship with the life of the self. The later Simmel comes to conceive how all historical developments of living beings (as well as those of civilizations and societies) come, sooner or later, to a critical phase, during which the social forms produced by associated life manifest all their obsolescence and inadequacy in the face of the new necessities that life constantly poses to itself. This critical phase becomes tragic when the human being realizes that he must get rid of the forms that he himself - through *Wechselwirkung* with his fellow human beings - has attempted to create without success. It constitutes an example of this tragic component in 1917 *Fundamental Problems in Sociology (Individual and Society)* (Simmel, 1950 [1917]), within which those same forms that had aroused the scholar's curiosity are connoted tragically because of the perpetual sense of inadequacy that the individual feels towards them. Art, language, modes of interaction constitute only some of the social (and cultural) forms from which the modern individual feels estrangement. Society

becomes unbreakable crystallization; old forms struggling to be abandoned without making room for new ones, from objectification of subjective actions society becomes an obstacle to the individual's will for self-realization. The world of modernity, in Simmel's gaze, constitutes the background in which this contrast rages.

Goethe and Simmel between development of forms and vision of life

The concept of life that the late Simmel contrasts with the sphere of forms can undoubtedly be traced back to Goethe, who had linked life and forms through a relationship of necessity whereby one could not exist without the other: forms constituted the phenomenal expression of that vital dynamism which without formal visibility could not have been expressed. Likewise, it would have been foolish to speak of the forms of the living-if the living were not such.

The important difference between their views of this relationship lies in the fact that Simmelian tragic is realized only in a historical *continuum*. For Simmel no *a priori* contrast is identifiable; they are given only in the dimension of the history of human beings and the evolution of their cultures and societies. The abstractness that characterizes his approach to the question derives perhaps from a desire to (like Goethe) make life and forms two reciprocal but separable functions; in this way it would prove possible to analyze the various ways through which their relationship is made explicit with greater simplicity. It follows that the only way to observe and analyze forms and life in their spontaneity, before their conflicting relationship is configured, necessarily requires the adoption of an "elevated" point of view, that of the Goethean "eye of the spirit", placed from the outset on a plane of inquiry alien to that of real, historical, concrete, human life and which is, therefore, immersed in the formal abstractness proper to a metahistorical condition. Like Goethe, Simmel does not conceive (or rather: he tries not to conceive) the two terms of this relationship as

irreducible, but as elements encompassed in a unified conception of the world.

For both, the abstractness through which the relationship between life and forms is declined is *methodologically envisaged* as a *necessary requirement* for the method of a science called upon to investigate all the various historical and evolutionary declinations of living forms. For Goethe as for Simmel, being natural or social takes on meaning in the eyes of the one who intends to know it only when observed in the light of its instantaneous and concrete appearance, realized by the free and spontaneous vital flow of nature for Goethe, and by the unpredictable and constant social interactions for Simmel.

Both reflections are united by the conception of life as a site of eternal formal mutation. Indeed, both Simmel and Goethe extol metamorphosis as the quintessence of vital scansion; life does not simply imply forms, it demands their perpetual modification. It is the vital experience that underlies every constituted form whose existence is defined by the necessities of life itself. Thus, every form turns out to be as precarious as the life that underlies it. What is of interest to our investigation lies precisely in life as the common element of Simmel's and Goethe's investigations; both morphologies converge on it as a primary dimension with respect to the forms that embody it.

Despite this privilege, both life and form are expressed in a fluid and free relationship, where the contrast, the opposition so evident to the eyes of the observer, disappears: the form of each being is regulated according to the vital actions and needs of the body. In this spontaneous flowing and harmonious continuity between the two terms, the Goethean Simmel upholds a concept of reality far removed from the Kantian transcendental idealism that had characterized his youthful philosophical training: reality ceases to be the fruit of a mnestic elaboration of the knowing subject in order to discover itself as an antecedent and far more subjective dimension

of spirit itself. As in a kind of self-reflexive moment it is reality that generates that element – man – devoted to its own contemplation. As Simmel writes in *Goethe*, reality already contains the spirit, what is necessary is just drawing it from the first (See Simmel, 1989-2015 [1913a]). In this, he reproposes the same Goethean self-reflexive scheme, according to which external reality determines the self-knowledge of the individual. By doing this Simmel gives rise to a thought in which social reality determines the same result determined by natural reality: knowledge of the whole through the part.

The meaning of the study of forms is made explicit in the consequences of global scope that this operation entails. By studying forms of relationship and as-sociation we are not only able to increase our knowledge of society, its manifestations and the processes that characterize them; at the same time, we increase our knowledge of the subject who lives it and who triggers the operation of knowledge of the social: the human being. This is the same pattern that Goethe finds in the study of nature: the separation between subject and object of knowledge is nullified because of a holistic conception of the scientific procedure that provides for the encroachment of one into the other. Goethe's philosophy and Simmel's sociology do not imagine any mediation between the percipient and the perceived: the phenomena themselves are given directly in their dateness, they reveal themselves to us. Goethe's critique of Newtonian inductivism clarifies well this vision: the direct manifestation of the truthfulness of natural phenomena is already revealed to our gaze without needing any kind of decomposition. Precisely, "look for nothing behind the phenomena: they themselves are already the theory." (See Goethe, 1952/66: 723).

Therefore, the dimension of thought is based on a pragmatic concept of truth: the direct vision of things reveals their truthfulness *ab origine*. While

> Kant becomes the philosopher of the intellect, the philosopher of the limit, of the separation of subject and object, essentially the philosopher of subjectivity [...] Goethe is the man born to see, who unites subject and object in a pantheistic vision of nature, the man of immediate, sensitive, intuitive, and even practical knowledge (Giacomoni, 1995: 14).

In Goethe, the subject accepts the world as his own part to exactly the same extent that he himself constitutes a part of the world he intends to know. Subject and object, life and forms, interior and exterior do not need a unifying principle; they are alike the pulsations of a single life, systole and diastole[6] of a single vital rhythm (See Simmel, 2007 [1916]). Life is a connection that already encompasses its own knowledge, achieved through one of its own entities: man.

The concept on which Simmel will raise a metaphysics of life constitutes for Goethe a problem of a practical order: the difficulty of understanding the phenomena of both worlds (natural and social) represents the concrete difficulty of grasping the momentary meaning and transitory significance of forms that are incessantly transforming. This is the reason why morphology proceeds by analogy, looking for similarities and differences between the parts that constitute for Goethe the denotative criterion of Empedoclean matrix that makes it possible to render the real intelligible; the metamorphic becoming of nature and society is made observable through the temporal succession of forms and the similarities that unite them. The historical contiguity of forms embraces the entire

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[6] This is a metaphor provided by Goethe himself (Goethe, 1952/66: 716); we find it again in the Principes de philosophie zoologique discutés en Mars 1830 au sein de l'Académie Royale des Sciences par M. Geoffroy de Saint-Hilaire, Paris 1830 (Goethe, 195/66: 380-414) re-proposed through the image of inhalation and exhalation, recalled by Goethe to emphasize the indispensability of a science capable of going from the "Whole to the individual" and from the "individual to the Whole".

garment of the real, allowing Simmel, through Goethe, to unify opposites into a multipolar whole. In its *coincidentia oppositorum*, the real regains its harmonious balance by rediscovering its immense value[7] .

Goethe's scientific papers represent much more than just an outline of a biology text. They outline an epistemological theory that reflects a precise worldview, in which an attempt is made to de-construct a type of science that, by privileging the moment of empirical analysis, believes it can dispense with the moment of theoretical synthesis by? Disengaging itself from an organic perspective of reality. As Goethe writes in the very first pages of the Jena's 1807 *Botanik*,

> Observing natural things, but especially living beings, with the desire to penetrate the organically connected whole of their existence and action, we believe that we succeed best by breaking them down into parts [...] Except that these analytical efforts, [...] bear in themselves many disadvantages. What was formerly alive is indeed broken down into elements; but from these one cannot recompose it or, still less, restore it to life (Goethe, 1952/66: 13)

Through a critique of anatomy, he strongly asserts this conviction: without a general theory of nature, the entire world of science runs the real risk of approximation. In this regard, morphology constitutes that scientific method which, without denying the achievements of its predecessors, contributes to the

[7] The rupture of duality through a median stance capable of encompassing both terms of the oppositions constitutes a characteristic disposition of Simmel, akin to Goethe's. In order to be able to understand it more clearly, we quote Kant and Goethe's final coda: "For the *Weltanschauung* of the epoch seemingly coming to a close, what remains for us regarding these two fields connects with the slogan: Kant *or* Goethe! The coming epoch may be under the sign of Kant *and* Goethe, rejecting any half-hearted mediation between them; not 'reconciling' their conceptual differences, but negating them through the fact of the lived experience of them. (Simmel, 2007 [1916]: 190)".

foundation of a general theory of nature capable of grasping life through the succession, movement, becoming, and mutation of forms. If it is true that *natura non facit saltus*, as Linnaeus believed, then only through a careful analysis of the living forms of the natural (or social for Simmel) world caught in their context is there a possibility of understanding the reasons for change. And the characteristics proper to this context, the phenomena that distinguish it, the processes that animate it can only be understood by living it, only by participating in its life.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is evident how Simmel's sociology constitutes the application to the field of social studies of the morphological method that Goethe had developed for the field of natural sciences. In this comparison, the overcoming of a further dualism is fully realized: the one existing between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geistwissenschaften*. Morphology enables to elaborate at the same time a history of forms and a general theory of them, both revealed in the transformative acts of organisms. As a science of becoming, it has no preferred objects, but constitutes a new way of seeing things, filled with new possibilities for understanding phenomena, whether natural or social. In Goethe's words:

> [...] morphology should legitimize itself as a science in its own right. As such it is in fact considered, and it must legitimize itself as a special science first of all by taking as its object what the other sciences treat only casually and fleetingly, then by bringing together what is dispersed in them, and finally by establishing a new point of view from which to observe natural things easily and safely. It has the great advantage of composing itself of

> elements recognized by all, of not being in conflict with any discipline (Goethe, 1952/66: 118)[8]

It thus enables us to grasp that unity of particular existences proper to nature and society in the singularity of each form of the living. Through the particularity of form, the spirit is able to glimpse the essence of every fragment of existence. Each form constitutes a limitation, an outline that encloses, in its finiteness, the infinitude of life force. Formal organization constitutes a canonical activity of life, stretched between giving itself limits and, at the same time, continually transcending them. But the Simmelian tragedy of life that is realized in submission to a form that cannot be transcended is not present in Goethe, in whose convictions the manifold connections that bind together all the entities of the world materialize an order in which the relations between the constituent elements and the forms through which they manifest themselves vary constantly. And in this Goethe finds harmony.

Emergence from tragicness for Simmel can only occur by rediscovering the authentic "proper form", corresponding to human beings's creative vocation. Only a subject who rediscovers the awareness of his own creative capacity can cultivate the hope of escaping from the modern condition of objectified man[9].

Simmelian vitalism hopes for the attainment of an ideal of knowledge rooted in the continuous relationship with the world, knowledge that can only be manifested through the dimension of creation; as, moreover, Goethe also believed. From him Simmel learns that the richness of the vital dimension lies precisely in the

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[8] These words belong to the text: *Vorarbeiten zur einer Physiologie der Pflanzen* (Goethe, 1952/66: 111-19)

[9] Such a conception, conniving with the assumption of anti-intellectualist positions, is characteristic of early 20th century German culture (See Lepenies, 1988). Probably, it isn't a coincidence that it belongs to the same time that will witness the spread of those philosophies of life that will soon evolve into philosophical anthropologies (See Cusinato, 2010).

extraordinarily large number of possibilities of formation, aspect that makes life (human or not) reveal all its intrinsic value.

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