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# Simmel's Law of the Individual: A Relational Idea of Culture

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Article abstract

*I propose to read Simmel's developments on the law of the individual as an attempt to solve the problem of modern culture, that is the increasing discrepancy between life and objective mind. I understand the law of the individual as a regulative idea of culture (in the sense of* Bildung*), which is, at the same time, relational and individual: as an ideal of the most fruitful relation and synthesis between individual life and objective formations of culture.*

MATTHIEU AMAT

# *Simmel's Law of the Individual: A Relational Idea of Culture*[*]

Abstract. *I propose to read Simmel's developments on the law of the individual as an attempt to solve the problem of modern culture, that is the increasing discrepancy between life and objective mind. I understand the law of the individual as a regulative idea of culture (in the sense of* Bildung*), which is, at the same time, relational and individual: as an ideal of the most fruitful relation and synthesis between individual life and objective formations of culture.*

## Problem, assumption and state of the art

Simmel's diagnosis and description of the tragedy of culture, which manifests itself in a particularly acute manner in a modernity dominated by a massive process of differentiation and objectification, is well known. Whereas the "idea of culture", understood as cultivation, as the "development and achievement" of the "personality as a whole and unity", describes and requires a "synthesis of a subjective development with an objectively spiritual value" (such as, for example, the logical, æsthetic or ethical values of "objective spiritual formations" like "arts and mores, science and purpose-shaped objects, religion and law") (GSG 14: 386, 399),[1] modern culture is characterized, on the contrary, by a constantly

[*] I warmly thank Susan Richter and George Ferenczi for their corrections in editing this text.

[1] We follow the translation of Simmel's "Begriff und Tragödie der Kultur" by M. Ritter and D. Frisby in Simmel 2000: 55-75 (58, 64). The references to the English version are in the footnotes.

increasing "discrepancy" between "life" and its "objectifications", which constitute the "objectified" or "objective spirit" (391, 395),[2] increasingly hindering the discovery of a "solution to the subject-object equation" in which an authentic culture consists (388).[3]

I propose to consider Simmel's elaboration of the "law of the individual" as an attempt to solve this problem, or at least – if this problem is, strictly speaking, tragic, and hence insoluble – a relative – and, as we will see, a relational – solution, which could allow its effects to be alleviated. In this sense, the law of the individual should be regarded as an "idea of culture" that would provide a suitable response to the critical situation of "modern culture". More precisely, I claim that the individual law gives the idea of culture its individual form, depending on the specific situation of every individual in the objective culture, on their position and relation vis-à-vis the various domains of culture.[4] To put this in Neo-Kantian terms, the law of the individual is a regulative idea that has value for only a given individual situation. For this reason, it is not likely to be determined definitely, but is subject to an ongoing redefinition – which does not prejudice its unconditional validity. The law of the individual indicates the path to be followed among the products of objective culture, in order to cultivate oneself, in a sense that we will have to specify. This does not, however, imply an actual consciousness of this law.

A significant number of works has been dedicated to the concept of individual law. They reflect the various forms that this concept seems to take in Simmel's work: sometimes æsthetic – from the 1902 essay on Rodin (GSG 7: 93; Faath, 1998, 223, 236; Köhnke, 1996: 489-497); sometimes ethical – as early as in the tenth chapter of the *Kantbuch* (GSG 9: 136-148; Lotter, 2000; Vandenberghe, 2000; Köhnke, 1996, 498-504; Lee and Silver, 2012; Müller, 2012:

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[2] Simmel 2000: 59, 61.

[3] Simmel 2000: 57.

[4] I use the expressions "law of the individual" (the standard translation of "*individuelles Gesetz*") and "individual law" interchangeably.

195-199); on other occasions sociological – the reciprocity of individualization and socialization could be seen to some extent as a sociological law of the individual (Abels and König, 2016; Köhnke, 1996, 293); metaphysical – "Law of the individual" is the fourth chapter of the *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysischen Kapitel* (Fitzi, 2002: 316-324); epistemological – see the development on "individual causality" in the *Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (GSG 9: 313-318; Adorno, 2003: 47; Fellmann, 1977: 65) – and even religious – since Christian "salvation" aspires to be "a universally valid [concept] which is at the same time individual" (GSG 7, 114-115; Krech, 2003: 155-157). Our assumption is that if the role or the status of the individual law is so difficult to determine, this is because its validity does not concern this or that domain of culture so much as the very idea of culture, not any given sphere of "objective value", but "cultural meaning", "value" or "signification" itself (GSG 14: 393, 395, 401).[5] Willfried Geßner (2003: 224-232) approached this assertion, pointing out that the law of the individual applies to the whole person (*ganzer Mensch*) and constitutes a response to the tragedy of culture (231-232), but does not, in my view, recognize its full potential within the framework of Simmel's philosophy. Let us observe how Simmel describes the axiological status of culture in his lectures on the "Philosophy of Culture" during the winter semester of 1906-1907:

> Unlike the primary evaluations (religious, æsthetic, economic, etc.), culture is a secondary evaluation, an evaluation of the evaluations. (…) It is the sole value of superior power, by which the primary evaluations shall be modified (GSG 21, 557).[6]

Culture, seen as the synthesis of life and the objective spirit, is an individual and living shaping of "primary" or "objective" evaluations and values in the form of an individual spirit, which we

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[5] Simmel, 2000: 60, 62, 65. The expressions of "signification" (*Bedeutung*), "meaning" (*Sinn*) and "value" (*Wert*) are interchangeable in this context.

[6] Here and wherever no English translations are mentioned: our translation.

will later call "soul". This value to the power of two could be just as objective as the primary value – its validity, however, must be individual. The law of the individual, in my view, is the ideal – but, as we will see, immanent – norm that drives augmentation of these values.

I must indicate my debt not only to the works I have already mentioned in the notes, but more specifically to those of Alessandro Ferrara and Olli Pyyhtinen. Like Ferrara, I see in the individual law a "way to conceive the compatibility between normativity and pluralism" and, in my interpretation, defend a "post-foundationalist notion of validity" (Ferrara, 2002: 60-69, 153). Pyyhtinen's insistence on not only the "who" but also the "what" in the individual, along with the three assumptions he proposes to understand the individual law (a "form" or a "model" "which has an ideal validity independent of its actual realization"; a "created" "individual type" that is a third term between subjectivity and objectivity; an "obligation" which "stems from the vital process and unity of the individual's life itself") inspired my work (Pyyhtinen, 2008: 289-291). I will try to show that these assumptions are not mutually exclusive.

"The Law of the Individual", the fourth chapter of Simmel's *Lebensanschauung*, is the sole text devoted explicitly to the concept. It remains the key reference on the subject.[7] Our argument will nevertheless begin with a reading of the second chapter of Simmel's *Goethe* (1912), soberly entitled "Truth".[8] Rarely commented upon, this text, which proposes a semantic and non-epistemological – and, to a certain extent, ontological – concept of truth, casts light upon the concept of individual law in its latest form. Finally, we will use

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[7] This chapter is the reworking of an article published five years previously in *Logos*: "Das individuelle Gesetz. Ein Versuch über das Prinzip der Ethik" (GSG 12, 417-470). We refer to the translation by John Andrews and Donald Levine: Simmel, 2010.

[8] This text may partially offset the loss of the famous manuscript "Vom Wesen der Wahrheit" (see Fitzi, 2002: 269).

the essays on the actor to support our hypothesis. Acting, since it obeys an individual law, will appear as an analogy of the process of culture.

**Individual truth: the value of man's relationship to the world**

Goethe writes in the poem "Vermächtnis" that "only that which is fertile can be true".[9] The phrase could be read in a pragmatic sense, yet Simmel rejects such an interpretation.[10] The pragmatic theory of truth, in Simmel's view, does not attribute truth or falsehood to a representation according to the adequacy of its content with an *a priori* norm or an objective reality, but according to its value for life. This value is conceived as "utility": "the correct representations of the environment have, as a result, an appropriate and useful action", so that "the *content* of a particular and determined representation" is the "condition of a particular and determined action" (GSG 15: 33).[11] The content "serves as an intermediary" between "the content of our goals" and "the content of reality". Pragmatism is then "a teleological theory of knowledge": a theory of knowledge insofar as it maintains the epistemic model equating the adequacy of representation with reality, a teleological theory insofar as it subjugates this model to "a means to an end" relationship (34).

Yet, for Goethe:

> The decisive point is neither the side of the representation turned towards the object, nor the ideal content of truth, in relation to which our action, if appropriate or inappropriate, is

[9] "Was fruchtbar ist, allein ist wahr"; quoted by Simmel in GSG 15: 33. The poem, written in 1829, can be found at the end of the *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*.

[10] On Simmel's relation to pragmatism, see Joas, 1992: 28-45 and Geßner, 2003: 239-245.

[11] Simmel's emphasis.

> useful or harmful, but the meaning that *the existence of the representation in our consciousness* has for our lives (GSG 15: 34).[12]

The reference to "consciousness" could be misleading. What is crucial is not the reflexive dimension, through which the representation becomes an objective content, but representing as a process. The truth of the "representation" depends on its meaning not as representative content, but as "*an element of life itself*". This meaning is thus immanent, determined in light of "life's totality". The "truth value" concerns "the representing process, the living function which is exercised within the developing complex of the soul" (35).[13] Each representation is an element of a soul's "living function", which is described in semantic terms.

> [The representation] must be related to the global, unitary sense [*einheitliche[r] Totalsinn*] of inner existence, and the energy that it triggers in this existence must become a moment of the emergence and development of this existence: and thus the content of these dynamic ways of representing will be said to be true (GSG 15: 35).

A representation's degree of truth measures the increase in meaning, which favours individual life in its totality, its "unitary sense". Is Goethe not supposed to have said to Eckermann during their conversation of 30 March 1831: "A fact in our lives is valuable, not in so far as it is true, but as it is significant"? Considering this point from the *Philosophy of Money*'s relational theory of value, one may argue that a representation's truth measures the intensity and variety of its reciprocal actions with the other representations that constitute the stuff of this life (as spiritual life). In this context, truth is not a value *for* life, as in pragmatism, but a value *of* life. Life is the

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[12] Simmel's emphasis.

[13] Simmel's emphasis. It might be useful to specify that the "soul" (*Seele*) for Simmel is a synthesis of life and objective spirit: "the soul is, so to speak, the form in which the mind (*Geist*), that is the logical-objective content of thought, lives in us" (GSG 5: 580).

middle term which relates being and value: life is both an ontological and axiological concept.

> Truth is, so to speak, the relation between a man's life and the world totality in which it takes place. It is not truth according to its logical content (…), but because the thought, no less than our physiological structure or our feelings, is a man's *being* [Sein *des Menschen*], which has its own correctness or non-correctness, as an actual quality, cause or consequence of the global rapport of this man to the world (GSG 15: 38).[14]

The logical opposition between falsehood and truth is relativized and absorbed in an "extensive concept of truth": a thought that could appear as "false" from a logical point of view might be, by virtue of its function at any time in the life's totality, considered as true under this "quasi absolute" concept of truth (36) – absolute in the sense that it integrates all that is relative and not in the sense that it opposes itself to the relative.

This absolutization-relativization of truth overcomes the differentiation between the domains of culture with their "objectively spiritual values" (logical truth, beauty, good, etc.). The truth is also the "just", "what is suitable" (43): it is the ideal of a life which realizes its most successful integration into the set of orders in which it takes place. It would be trivial in this context to speak of a truth's utility. Truth's validity does not depend on the basic satisfaction of needs, nor on the satisfaction of specific axiological demands (logical, ethical, etc.). The truth lies "beyond the alternative between causality and teleology", between being (conceived as nature) and value. Consequently, a man whose representing is true "would be lying, so to speak, as to the elementary point where life's reality and life's value are not yet separate" (43-44); to the ideal point where, as Simmel writes in "Werte des Goetheschen Lebens" (1914), "life and its objective product would no longer be separate

[14] Simmel's emphasis.

from each other" (GSG 20: 32). The opposition between life and objective culture would be overcome.

However, all life is not always what it should be. Two claims have to be reconciled: on one hand, what seems to be an identity of being and value; on the other, the existence of an ideal by which life has to be judged. The ideal must be founded in the "being" itself, as individual and changing life. The solution finds its clearest expression in the "Werte des Goetheschen Leben".

> Each man, insofar as he differs from others, has a different relationship to the world. Perhaps a certain man requires a certain type of behaviour, certain presuppositions, a certain "truth" upon which his life is based, to elevate his life and his relationship to the world, to its highest fruitfulness (GSG 20: 34).

Life would thus be in "happy and genial harmony" with the world and it "would possess its maximum value" (*Wertmaximum*) (32). Here, truth measures the quality of a relationship to the world, a quality for which the criteria, though they may be individual rather than universal, are no less objective. This ontological concept of truth, far from making truth a monolithic universality which would impose itself absolutely onto each individual reality, allows truth to be conceived as individual and evolving, as relative, not in a subjectivist or sceptical sense, but in relational terms.

The "apparent subjectivism of the Goethian concept of truth" – which is believed to be found in statements such as "each individual expresses only himself when he speaks of nature" (GSG 15: 46-47) – is overcome by the direction of a relational ontology. Far from being "subjective", "the [individual] 'inclinations' are themselves objective facts", such that "knowing is a cosmic event [*Ereignis*]" (49, 51). To Goethe, "human knowing is not a free floating ideal shape, which would have its homeland in a τὸπος ἄτοπος (…). It is itself a reality, and its growth depends on the totality of being, and stays and lives in its domain" (54). Knowing, in a not strictly epistemological sense, is simultaneously a mode of being and a

perspective on the world; it is a way to occupy one's proper place in the world.

This can be highlighted by a detour through Simmel's analysis of Leibniz's monadology. In the *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (1910), Simmel proposes an anti-idealistic interpretation of this metaphysics. The notion of monad would make it possible to overcome the subject/object opposition by means of a "subject's objectification" (GSG 14: 86):

> The monad does not stand facing the world in the sense of idealism, whose self always continues its proper life and is not subjugated, in its most intimate sense, to the necessity of building a world; rather, to the monad, representing the world is its proper being; it does not have the object, it is the object (GSG 14: 86).

Because the monad has "the denseness [*Dichtigkeit*] of the object", it possesses a true determination, constitutes an individuality and not subjectivity's empty form. Through its access to consciousness, however, this individual being "does not represent only the world but also itself (…); it knows itself as the bearer of a representation of the world and remains, so to speak, facing the world" (86). As spirits, monads are not simply enveloped in the world but envelop the world themselves. This interpretation of Leibniz helps to understand the oft-quoted Goethe aphorism: "what I call truth is the knowing of my relationship to myself and to the exterior world" (GSG 15: 38). Simmel can thus write, in the chapter entitled "Individualismus":

> The human being is truly an individual with the condition that he is not solely a point in the world, but himself a world. And he can prove it only if his individual quality appears as the determination of a possible worldview, as the germ of a spiritual cosmos, whose ideal totality is only partially realized through its particular manifestations (GSG 15: 169).

Truth (in an individual and ontological sense) is measured by the degree to which this "ideal totality" is realized, a totality which is both world *and* individuality. Now, to return to one of the descriptions of culture in Simmel's 1910 "Concept and Tragedy of Culture":

> The contents with which the self is supposed to conduct this organization into a personal, unified world do not belong to him alone; they are *given* to him by some spatial, temporal and ideal entities external to him. They are simultaneously the contents of some other worlds – social and metaphysical, conceptual and ethical (GSG 14: 403-404).[15]

Culture is to make from oneself a world, by means of objective contents which constitute the various cultural worlds, and despite the proper objective demands of these worlds. To the extent that one understands the world in a cultural and not only in a naturalist sense, this interpretation of the Goethian concept of individual truth serves the formation of an idea of culture well. The later developments of the individual law build upon this understanding of individual truth.

## A meta-ethical concept of individual law

Let us now consider the *Lebensanschauung*'s chapter devoted to individual law. The problem is posed first in ethical terms: the challenge is to overcome the opposition between the "life" in all its mobility and the "ought to", the "moral principles". This overcoming would be made possible by means of a "law of the individual" designed as "living ought to" (GSG 16: 347-348).[16] Many commentators have described this problem and the spirit of its solution very well (Lotter, 2000: 180-183; Geßner 224-229; Lee and Silver, 2012: 131-134). Insufficient attention has been paid,

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[15] Simmel 2000: 67.

[16] Simmel 2010: 100-101.

however, to the fact that the "problematic (…) extends far beyond the ethical arena and signifies a tragedy of spiritual culture in general" (351). "Formulated most succinctly and generally", this tragedy consists in that

> As its immediate manifestation, life at the level of consciousness [*Geist*] produces objective creations in which it expresses itself and which for their part, as life's containers and forms, tend to receive its further flows – yet, at the same time, their ideal and historical determinacy, boundedness and rigidity sooner or later come into opposition and antagonism with ever-variable, boundary-dissolving, continuous life (GSG 16: 351-352).[17]

This conflict manifests itself in the ethical domain through the "unsatisfying character of moral principles", and the "uneasiness" that is experienced with this "alienation [*Lebensfremdheit*] or sterilizing distance from life" (535),[18] but it potentially concerns any cultural field. In response to this conflict, individual law is thus, to borrow an expression of Krech's (1998: 155-157), a meta-ethical concept[19]: *ethical* in the sense that its demands relate to the conduct of life and constitute an "ought to", *meta*-ethical in the sense that ethical requirements, strictly speaking, do not exhaust the various demands to which the individual life, as life in culture, is subject. Whereas ethical requirements concern one dimension of life, one sphere of value, the law of the individual applies, as Geßner (2003: 231) points out, to the whole person (*ganzer Mensch*). The issue is to reduce the life-form conflict *in general*, without sacrificing the idea of an objectively binding duty for life. The solution shall be, by means of

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[17] Simmel 2010: 103.

[18] Simmel 2010: 104.

[19] Krech observes in Simmel's work an evolution from an "æsthetic" to a "meta-ethical concept" of individual law. By contrast, we do not privilege the interpretation of individual law as a functional equivalent of Christian salvation. Besides, one of the values of individual law is that it can be specified in different forms of personal fulfilment.

a "redissolution of these rigid, quasi substantializing objectifications", to recover "the flowing relations, the functional, holistic linkages [*Gesamtverbindungen*] of the life-unity to which [these objectifications] belong" (GSG 16: 413).[20] The law of the individual appears here to be a piece of Simmel's relativist – relationist – programme, which aims for "the dissolution of the substantial into the functional" without falling into "sceptical dissolution".[21]

*Life's form, Ought's form*

One must make no mistake: there is no opposition in principle between life and duty. The latter is, in fact, "a primary mode in which individual consciousness experiences a whole life". It is not added to life from the outside – a life which would in itself be axiologically neutral. Nevertheless, "the Ought has not been recognized as an absolutely primary category, but instead a source and legal basis was sought behind it: a God and His will, society and its needs, reason and its logical values, the Ego and its well-known interests, etc." (GSG 16: 349).[22] All of these attempts, however, are doomed to failure, since "being-as-Ought is just as irreducible as being-as-actual". To seek a life's "primary mode" outside of this life itself condemns it to circular conceptual constructions: "the obligation must be obliged". Just as one should drop the idea of basing reality on anything other than itself, one should acknowledge that duty has no end but "stands beyond all teleologies and their unavoidable subjectivisms". Duty is an "Ur-phenomenon", a "fundamental and foundational significance", given with life itself (350).[23]

If such an approach invalidates all attempts to deduce duty from anything other than life's structure itself, it also neutralizes

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[20] Simmel, 2010: 146.

[21] As stated in Simmel's famous " Selbstdarstellung".

[22] Simmel, 2010: 101.

[23] Simmel, 2010: 102.

scepticism regarding the existence of real duties (350).[24] The problem does not concern the existence of duties, but the determination of their contents. On the one hand, some contents are likely to compete with each other; while on the other, not all contents may be appropriate to the singularity and mobility of individual life (353).[25] How are we to conceive a duty that is objective without imposing itself on life artificially? This question requires a metaphysical answer: "we will attempt here to determine only that metaphysical location (…) [,] to do justice to the intrinsic structure and the context in consciousness of the ethical phenomenon". The solution consists in making life itself this place, and not "a metaphysical reality which stands beyond the individual's life" – as in the Kantian "law of 'reason'". The contents of duty emerge from the totality of an individual life, so that action is not demanded and judged from a general law, as an isolated action, comparable to those of other individuals (351).[26]

Is this "individual law" really consistent with the idea of culture? Does it not rather correspond to the idea of a "pure self-development of the subjective spirit", an "individual inner development, in which no external factor may intervene" (GSG 14: 398-399)?[27] Simmel's 1910 essay opposed the latter, for which religiosity is the major example, to the idea of culture, as "path of the soul [which] leads through values and scales", through "objectively spiritual constructs" which are alien to it (389).[28]

*The law of the individual is not the law of a subjectivity*

The interpretation of individual law as an ideal of a pure inner development is premised on the illusion that life could come to

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[24] Simmel, 2010: 101.

[25] Simmel, 2010: 104.

[26] Simmel, 2010: 102-103.

[27] Simmel 2000: 63.

[28] Simmel 2000: 57 (translation amended).

fruition independently from all objectification, by recovering the innocence and spontaneity of a life "before" culture and its objectifications. Such a development is inconceivable, except perhaps in the exceptional case of mystical religious fulfillment.[29] We must avoid any confusion: "the false fusion between individuality and subjectivity must be dissolved, just like that between universality and lawfulness" (GSG 16: 410).[30] Not only must the concept of individual law be protected from all subject arbitrariness, but we must also master a concept of individuality that does not entail a subjective core, which would differentiate qualitatively and definitely between this or that individual, and would envelop or prefigure a future immanent development. We must not start with the one but with the many and, on this point, take leave of Leibniz: in all things, "the 'two' is prior to the 'one'" (GSG 6: 76). Individual law is not analytically and virtually contained in the individual life that would be its deployment. It stands "beyond" the individual, as an ideal whose realization is necessary partial. It is the ideal of a constantly reshaped relationship, depending on the concrete position of the individual in a social and historical world, and not a subjectivist ethics or a variation on a romantic ideal, as Martinelli (2011: 120-122, 250-251) and Lotter (2000: 195) rightly insist. "Individuality that lives in the form of the Ought is not something ahistorical, non-material" (GSG 16: 409).[31]

> This Ought – when it is recognized as a form of each individual life coordinated with its actuality-form – accepts all possible linkages external to itself (…); for all ties, demands, impulses – whether social or fateful, rational or religious, or stemming from the thousand conditions of the environment – surely influence

[29] See Amat, 2015a: 388-395.

[30] Simmel 2010: 143-144.

[31] Simmel 2010: 143.

> this life itself; duty is determined according to the filling and forming that life experiences from these (GSG 16: 404-405).[32]

Life's Ought-form corresponds to its actuality-form; anything that shapes the latter shapes the former. Being "the citizen of a specific State", for example, will play a part in determining the individual law, whether the individual likes it or not: for example, the fact that an anti-militarist does not believe he should have to do military service does not refute the fact that this service is an objective duty. At issue is not a general ethical principle, which demands that a citizen must serve the State, but a concrete ethical determination of life: "belonging to the State is woven into the actual being or life of the individual, such that the Ought (according to which this life fulfills itself ideal-ethically) includes the fulfillment of that demand" (410).[33] Founding duty in being, on the basis of this example, may seem an unfortunate or at least dubious endeavour. It is, however, the very condition of a true individualization of duty – and it may be that some circumstances provide good reasons for the anti-militarist. "There is [no action] whose material content [*Sachgehalt*] does not have above it as the ultimate authority the following question: is it then *my* duty, does it belong to the objective-ideal configuration of *my* life?" (407).[34]

As was already made clear in the 1904 *Kant*, individual law is the well-understood categorical imperative, that is, individualized: the lack of *a priori* determination of what duty is made of is not interpreted as a formal and universalist conception of ethics, but rather constitutes the condition for the possibility of an individualized determination of duty that is able to truly take into account the concreteness of the situation, of the singular relationship of the individual to the objective arrangement (GSG 9: 125-128; GSG 16: 404-407; Lee and Silver, 2012: 131-134). It would

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[32] Simmel 2010: 140.

[33] Simmel 2010: 143.

[34] Simmel 2010: 141. Simmel's emphasis.

be also a reformulation of the Eternal return: "instead of the truly bleak Nietzschean thought – 'Can you desire that this action of yours recur infinitely often?' – I propose: 'Can you desire that this action of yours should define your entire life?'" (GSG 16: 421).[35] The whole meaning of our life and the meaning we give to the world is at stake in every instant.

This pathos of extreme responsibility, this pre-Existentialist tone that pervades some parts of the text, could suggest a decisionist interpretation. It is true that Simmel leaves us poorly armed to answer the question we just posed. We cannot even conceive of a clear determinacy of the Ought, because of the mismatch between conceptual content and living obligation. Nevertheless, we do not think, despite what is alleged by Vandenberghe (2000, 175), that the answer shall consist in an "existential decision".[36] The "decision" as to what I am supposed to do at any moment "remains reserved to the sense and constellations of my whole life" (GSG 16: 407).[37] "The sense *and* the constellations"; thus also the sense of these constellations – that is, the relationships established with the environment, and particularly with the objective constructs that constitute the world(s) of culture.[38] The meaning of individual life is

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[35] Simmel 2010: 151. Simmel refers, of course, to the *Gay Science*'s § 341 (eKGWB/FW-341).

[36] Some decisionist features can be observed in the last texts nevertheless, explained in part by the war (Fitzi, 2005: 47-56 and Thouard, 2014: 571). To contest the decisionist interpretation does not preclude seeing in the individual law a figure of transition towards existentialism; see, for example, Gerson (1932: 61-78), who interprets Simmel's individual law from Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, in his doctoral thesis prepared under the supervision of Eduard Spranger and Max Dessoir.

[37] Simmel 2010: 142.

[38] Max Weber agrees with Simmel when he pairs individual fulfilment with self-forgetfulness in relation to objective tasks: "attend to our work and face up to the 'demands of the day', both personally and professionally. And those demands are plain and simple, as long as each of us finds and obeys the daemon who holds the threads of *his* life" (Weber, 1992: 111 translated by Bruun: Weber, 2012: 353).

a functional configuration that exceeds the limits of the individual and its consciousness. To remain within the existentialist paradigm, we can speak, as Ferrara does (2002: 64-69), of a non-subjective and "normative concept of authenticity":[39] while strictly existentialist authenticity reveals itself only in the face of death or nothingness, the challenge here is to find an authentic relationship with particular objects, a relationship that is determined at least as much by these "objects" as by the "subject" (an opposition which should be relativized).

*Culture as individual law and "ideal requirement"*

To clarify the idea of an action which "defines [an] entire life", Simmel proposes an analogy that cannot be understood unless it is considered in light of his essays on culture:

> This development of the Ought behaves like that of theoretical values. Whether something is valid as truth for us depends on the entire complex of principles, methods, and experiential contents known by us at the moment, whose association with the new cognition legitimates the latter. (…) [E]very recognized truth alters the conditions by which it itself is recognized as truth. Well, in the same way, this holds for the development of our life in terms of the Ought (GSG 16: 421).[40]

Just as any "new knowledge" is in principle reciprocally determined by the entire theoretical edifice in which it takes place, the meaning of any action is determined by life as a whole. Following the analogy, one could say: as we aim, from a theoretical perspective, to produce statements that will increase the determinacy of the edifice as a whole, we will call, from a meta-

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[39] We might also evoke the way Charles Taylor amends the concept of authenticity, as opposed to "subjectivism's slippage": "authenticity does not oppose the requirements which transcend the Self: it calls them" (Taylor, 1994: 49).

[40] Simmel 2010: 151-152 (translation slightly amended).

ethical perspective, for decisions, actions, thoughts, readings, that will increase the meaning of life as a whole. But this meaning depends on relationships with objective (theoretical, æsthetic, political, economic, etc.) constructs.

We also need to go one step further: the connection established here between individual law and a theory of logical truth, which is borrowed literally from the third part of *Philosophy of Money*'s first chapter (GSG 6: 96-107), is not only an analogy but an inclusion. Insofar as individual law depends on the position of the individual in the cultural or ideal world(s), the question of the supra-individual validity of objective constructs becomes part of the question of individual law, understood as second-order validity. The concept of individual truth dealt with the relationship of the individual to a world held to be unitary (nature). The law of the individual projects the Goethian solution onto a man's split and plural position in the world, scattering it in the multiplicity of heterogeneous relationships which the individual maintains with the objective orders born of socio-historical differentiation.

If one admits the semantic interpretation of individual law as the ideal of maximizing life's meaning, one shall, in principle, take into account all of the axiological dimensions in which this increase is possible: theoretical, ethical, political, affective, etc. From this meta-ethical point of view, the problem of individual law merges with that of culture: "the relation of contents of consciousness as experienced to those consisting in detached ideality (…) forms the principal problem of these pages", Simmel expounds in an excursus of "The Law of the Individual" (GSG 16: 373).[41] This "detached ideality" belongs to what Simmel called, from the *Philosophy of Money* on, the objective spirit. This problem, formulated as a "transposition" or "conversion" of a "simple logical structure into living-psychic reality" is called "metaphysical"; the same holds for the problem of

[41] Simmel 2010: 119.

culture in "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture" (377):[42] culture is a "metaphysical form" in which the "dualistic form of existence" is overcome, thanks to "an objectification of the subject and a subjectification of the object" (GSG 14: 390).[43] Simmel claims in the *Lebensanschauung*, furthermore, that the law of the individual relates to "ideal lines" which are "woven" in the individual configuration constituted by the relationship of the individual life to the objective culture (GSG 16: 351).[44] The 1910 essay already used the metaphor of the "invisible lines" which the process of culture had to prolong and develop (GSG 14: 386).[45] These lines point to the horizons of the maximal fruitfulness of the individual's relationship with the world, that is, to an individual, unique and maximal vitalization of the contents of objective culture.

The fourth chapter of the 1910 *Hauptprobleme der philosophie*, "Von den idealen Forderungen", proposes a category under which I propose to subsume the individual law: the "ideal requirement". Its objects are not the domains of objective culture (art, science, etc.) but the "constellation" (*Konstellation*) drawn by the relationship of a man to the world (GSG 14: 107). The ideal requirement traces the contours of a "world of the ought" (*Welt des Sollens*):

> The contents of this world can be as various and variable as possible, to the point of changing from hour-to-hour – however, when we encounter them in us, they draw invisible lines ahead and in our practical reality, lines which not determine, as the "third empire" of knowledge, not its objective configuration, but its value (GSG 14: 108).

The validity of this "world of the ought" differs from that of the "third empire", which is the other name of the "objective spirit":

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[42] Simmel 2010: 121.

[43] Simmel 2000: 58.

[44] Simmel 2010: 103.

[45] Simmel 2000: 56.

"an empire of ideal contents, which are neither subjective nor objective" (99). Differentiated, it will constitute the different domains of objective culture, whose "objective configuration" supports "objective" or "primary values" (theoretical, religious, æsthetic, etc.), whereas the "ideal requirement" concerns the living and concrete encounter with these objective configurations. This requirement aims to increase a second-order value: the value for life of these primary values, that is, their cultural value.

By thus clarifying the status of the individual law, it can be shown that the different assumptions made by Pyyhtinen are to a certain extent compatible. The law of the individual appears indeed to be a "pre-existent model" which possesses an "ideal validity" (Pyyhtinen, 2008: 290) – but which is constantly redefined depending on the constellations in which our life takes place; as a "created" "individual type" insofar as each of our actions or decisions redesign its contours – but it "expresses" less an "irreplaceable nature" (291) than a singular subjective-objective situation; an obligation which "stems from the vital process" – provided that we do not reduce its obligation to "self-responsibility" (292) and acknowledge a responsibility toward the objective formations and their "objectively spiritual value".

## The role's actualization by the actor as an analogical figure for culture's individual law

### *The convergence between the æsthetic and meta-ethical concepts of individual law*

The affinity between the idea of culture and individual law appears particularly clearly in Simmel's texts devoted to the actor. In "The Philosophy of the Actor", published in *Der Morgen* in 1908, Simmel describes the "performance of the actor" as an "enigma", and thereby approaches the problem of culture:[46]

[46] This is the first text devoted to the theatre (GSG 8, 424-432), and was followed by the 1909 paper "Über den Schauspieler. Aus einer Philosophie der Kunst"

> The actor's performance contains an internal opposition that poses an enigma for the philosophy of art. As it stands, it has the effect of a spontaneous expression (…), exteriorization of an immediate life, determined only by itself and its fate. (…) What is wonderful is that this life finds its expression by means of a given content, shaped from an elsewhere, in words and actions upon which meaning and relations impose themselves as a rigorous and alien necessity (GSG 8, 424).

This remarkable phenomenon cannot be explained by the sole "artist's creative subjectivity": it is the role that is judged and not a self-expression. However, shifting the emphasis to the objective dimension of the role does not signify the ideal of an exemplary interpretation, which would be made possible by an actor forgetting himself in favour of the role. Indeed, very different interpretations can seem equally appropriate. The "ideal requirement" that shall orient our interpretation applies not to the role, but to the actor's relationship to the role. Beyond the "actor's subjectivity" and the "objective task that is set by the writer", "a third element arises: the requirement that *this* role imposes on *this* actor, and perhaps on no other, the particular law that it imposes on the actor's personality".[47] The "role's individuality" thus overcomes the "false subjectivity" as well as the "false objectivity" (GSG 8: 425). This "particular law" is just as objective and imperative as a "moral norm", but functions as a norm "which would impose itself on a man in a concrete situation, but would require from him only the particular ethical performance that *his* personality may deliver and has to accomplish in this situation, a performance which could be completely different for another personality in the same situation". In his 1913-1914 lectures on the "Philosophy of Art", Simmel describes this law in terms of truth, in a manner that justifies our rapprochement between what

(GSG 12, 22-27), the 1912 "Der Schauspieler und die Wirklichkeit" (308-315) and a second "Philosophie des Schauspielers", drawn from the *Nachlass* and published in 1923 by Gertrud Kantorowicz (GSG 20, 192-219). On the paradigmatic character of the actor in Simmel's work, see Thomas, 2013.

[47] Simmel's emphasis.

we have called "individual truth" and the law of the individual (425).[48]

Æsthetic and meta-ethical concepts of individual law merge: the actor's interpretation has to follow the ideal law of a relationship between his "subjectivity" and an "objective spirit", but insofar as the interpretation is a "stylization", it is in itself a work of art and, as such, obeys an individual law as an æsthetic ideal (426). Individual law that imposes itself on the actor can be described, at the same time, as the law of a relationship to the world and as the immanent law of a work-in-progress. This point is developed more specifically in "The Actor and Reality": "the drama subsists as an independent and autonomous work of art. Does the actor raise it to the power of two?" Yes, answers Simmel, because the interpretation is not a "realization" (*Verwirklichung*) of a work of art, but a second "stylization" and "sensualization" (*Versinnlichung*) of an already objectivized content (GSG 12: 308-309). Going deeper into this problem in the posthumous version of "The Philosophy of the Actor", Simmel points out that this "sensualization" of the objective role can not be described as "appearance" opposed to "reality". The role's accomplishment, the reason why it can be understood in terms of truth and lawfulness, lies elsewhere: the actor "*is* a king, a 'true' king – but definitely not a real king" (GSG 20: 194). As in the *Goethe* chapter we commented on above, truth designs at the same time an ideal but immanent norm of a relation (here the one between the role and the actor), and the coherence of elements (here the stylization that makes this particular king).

Simmel finally describes acting by means of the category of actualization. "Sensualization" is grounded in the actor's "interior actualization of the drama (…), a subjective animation, so to speak,

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[48] Simmel's emphasis. "One can define truth as an ideal rapport relation between a given *objectivity* and a given *subjectivity*. (…) Once the subject and object are given, an ideal line is formed between them, a line which determines [this truth]. (…) This role and only this one, that the actor and only that actor gives, as an ideal result, the way in which this actor has to play his role" (GSG 21: 172-173).

of the objective-spiritual content which lies in the drama as it has been printed" (200). This point is particularly interesting for us, since the *Philosophy of Money* already depicted the objective spirit crystallized in the cultural products as a potentiality (of meaning), and all understanding of this objective spirit as an actualization of this potentiality – which could never exhaust it (GSG 6: 626). A pertinent and rich actualization is then the fruitful meeting of the individual life and the objective potentiality of meanings. Thus it comes as no surprise that Simmel wonders "whether each reader is not a fragmentary actor or an actor who would remain at some level of interiority" (GSG 20: 200). The drama is actually a paradigmatic situation of the individual's relationship to the objective spirit that we call culture. Drama presents, in an æsthetic and reflexive form, a fundamental performance of individual life as cultural life.

*Drama and form of life. The turn toward ideas, the sociological a priori and the idea of culture*

In the "Schauspielkunst" section of Simmel's lectures on the "Philosophy of Art", the actor's problem is related explicitly to the concept of culture: "everyday life presents a preform of the art of drama. In culture, every man or almost every man has a profession, a task, belongs to a social stratum, is subject to one or another requirement" (GSG 21: 165). He is compelled to satisfy them, to follow a "certain general and predetermined schematism". It may pass for "hypocrisy". In fact,

> Life rarely finds its form on its own and alone; completely determined forms of professions, social strata, etc. are available, and it is inevitably in these forms that our individual lives express themselves. In this sense, we are *all* actors, not as artists, but in the sense that there is in us a preform of art. (GSG 21: 165)

One might recognize here the theory of life and forms which found its latest version in "The Turn towards Ideas", the second chapter of the *Lebensanschauung*. As art, acting is a form, subject to

an objective legality, but as a preform, it is an "Ur-phenomenon" of life as cultural life (GSG 12: 314). It is a reformulation in the lexicon of *Kultur-* and *Lebensphilosophie* of the second sociological *a priori* that makes society possible: the individual's ability to assume roles while remaining exterior to them (GSG 11: 47-49). In this sense, to be an actor is one of the conditions of the possibility of society. But here we stand neither in the æsthetic realm – this role is subject to no æsthetic validity –, nor in one of culture's *stricto sensu*, the reason being that actors must submit to a schematism whose cultural value is not taken into account; the process of socialization in itself does not have any cultural value, which presupposes a turn towards ideas, and emancipation from life's pragmatic teleology (GSG 16: 245, 255-256).

The idea of culture entails both a greater distance and a greater intimacy between the subjective and objective poles than the sociological *a priori*. The socialization process may be depicted, first, as integration in forms of life which are immediately given, which impose themselves and are taken for granted. But it also appears – especially since societies know a differentiation process – as an incessant game and dialectic between the individual and their role – a "comédie humaine". The very idea of culture, in contrast, involves an *a priori* distance vis-à-vis the cultural products, in which individual life recognizes some objective values. A form of culture is not necessarily a form of socialization. Culture entails an affinity, which is acknowledged as a value, between the individual life and the objective spirit. The *a priori* of culture is the possibility for a synthesis between life and objective constructs: not as a constant unity of social forms that is already given, not as a problematic unity of an individual with their roles, but as a third-term unity, a *sui generis* form that has its own specific validity –at the same time constituting an actualization of the two synthetized terms.

That is why we cannot completely follow the conclusions of a recent and inspiring paper by Monica Lee and Daniel Silver, who see in individual law a type of "social relationship, namely one's relationship with oneself", so that individual law becomes a piece of

a "formal sociological project" and "can be integrated" as a "conception of authentic individuality (…)[,] into a conception of society as forms of interaction" (Lee and Silver, 2012: 124, 140). Their insistence on a "relational self" and on the need to complete sociology by adding ethics is undoubtedly quite relevant, but leaves aside the proper problem of culture – a term that occurs only once in their paper, without being thematized itself – yet one which Simmel never stopped addressing. Between me and myself, there are not only the forms of socialization (and reciprocally, between me and the others, my own relational self), but the formations of objective culture. The obligation toward myself, in which the law of the individual actually consists, is mediated by obligations toward objective configurations of culture, and reciprocally or, to state it unambiguously, is an obligation both to myself and to objective culture. In my interpretation, the law of the individual has more to do with the philosophy of culture than with formal sociology – there is even something forced in imposing the paradigm of formal sociology onto individual law (although this remains a frequent tendency in Simmel interpretation). It would be a major challenge to attempt to unify these approaches. We should start by considering "society" (or rather socialization) and "ethics" as domains of culture among others – as Simmel does when he writes, in "The Concept and Tragedy of Culture", about "ethical" and "social" "world[s]" next to "metaphysic" or "conceptual" ones (GSG 14: 403-404).[49] Lee and Silver described individual law pretty well as it is regarded from the social world.

Let us return to "The Concept and the Tragedy of Culture". After indicating different forms of "dualism" between the "individual spirit" and "being", Simmel describes the cultural process as a way of overcoming this dualism.

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[49] Simmel 200: 67 (see above the end of our section 1). On this "cosmology of culture", see Amat, 2015b.

> Our relationship to those objects with which we become cultivated by incorporating them into ourselves is a different one, since they are themselves spirit that has taken objective form in those ethical and intellectual, social and æsthetic or religious and technical forms. This dualism, with which the subject (…) faces the object that exists for itself, experiences an incomparable formation when both elements are spirit. Thus, the subjective spirit must abandon its subjectivity but not its spirituality in order to experience that relationship to the object through which it becomes cultivated. This is the only way in which the dualistic form of existence, immediately posited with the existence of the subject, organizes itself into an inwardly uniform referentiality. An objectification of the subject and a subjectification of the object occur here, which constitute the specific nature of the cultural process, and in which, beyond the latter's individual contents, its metaphysical form is displayed (GSG 14: 390).[50]

The subjective life/objective spirit synthesis that is the culture cannot be taken for granted, in contrast with the forms of socialization: culture requires an effort of de-subjectification, abandoning oneself to the proper logic of cultural objects. Abandoning subjectivity is not devitalization: the issue is to leave in us as much of the objective spiritual contents as possible, in mobile and reciprocal action. Nor is it de-individualization: every path in culture is an individual path. Each path is a progressive actualization of potentialities that lie in the objective spirit – actualization which, unlike the theatre, does not lead to an exterior objectification, is not dominated by the criteria of æsthetic validity, and performs on the scale of an entire life. The individual path in objective culture is, however, not yet culture as idea, that is the law of the individual which overhangs this path, and with which it never completely converges : the idea which allow the individual to orient himself on the path, while discovering it to be partial and imperfect.

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[50] Simmel 2000: 58 (slightly amended translation).

## Concluding remarks: The law of the individual as a real a priori of culture

Simmel's philosophical program has been described, in a felicitous expression, as a "relativist reformulation of criticism" (relativist meaning here not a type of subjectivist or sociologist reductionism, but a general theory of interaction). In Simmel's words, the issue is to reconcile seemingly opposite claims: on the one hand, "the concept of value (…) contains not only a *regressus in infinitum* (…), but also a *circulus vitiosus*, since one finds always, when tracing the relations far enough, that the value of A is based on the one of B, whereas the value of B is based on one of A". On the other hand, it is a "no less indubitable fact that some absolute and objective values demand to be acknowledged" (GSG 22, 292).[51] The theory of value that is found in the *Philosophy of Money*'s first chapter tries to answer the problem, by showing how norms of validity emerge, in an immanent way, from the interactions (*Wechselwirkungen*) between all sorts of elements: "the norms – whether named ideas by Plato (…) [or] *a priori* by Kant (…) – are never more than the species and forms of the relativities themselves, developing between the elements of reality while also shaping them" (GSG 6: 124). Some results are well known: the relational determination of economic value by the means of exchange (55-56); the "relational concept" of truth, which gives the "geometry", or, more broadly, the "theoretical empire" the form of a circle (96-103); the interactionist *a priori* which makes both society and sociology possible (GSG 11: 42-61); "legality in the work of art" (GSG 13: 382-294), etc. Each domain of culture has its relativized, historicized, but nevertheless objective *a priori*: its immanent validity or legality.

There are, however, other sorts of *a priori*: not those of objective culture's domains, but of the relation between individual life and those domains; we could say: second-order *a priori*. As such, the "*a*

[51] Letter of 10 May 1898 to Rickert.

*priori* which makes history possible" is also the "*a priori* of personality's unity" in which not only the "comprehensible unity which bind together the complex of representations standing behind an historical action" is understood (GSG 9: 273), but also the "individuality" of the historian's personality itself.[52] Thus emerges, at the juncture of the historian's individuality and the objective formations he considers, an "'idea' of the object", the "specific 'truth'" of which the historian is capable, a truth which is described as knowledge of neither a "causality" or a "reason", but as "meaning" (*Sinn*), as the "individual colouration and arrangement" of "given facts" (273). Historical knowledge is thus a third term above subject and object. Another "specific *a priori*" (GSG 20: 386) attracted Simmel's attention in his lessons on pedagogy: the "pedagogical *a priori*" (444), which is, compared to the *a priori* of science, a "second-order principle of coherence", the one which allows to "present to the pupil the selected content in a coherent suite" (386), so that the pupil "feels" that "they belong to the life's mobility, some motionless contents to assimilate" (387).[53] Aiming to build a "secondary 'synthetic' unity (…) between life and objective spirit", pedagogy has to "use the stability of the objective so that the [pupil's] individuality should be formed" (334-335) – an individuality which should not be confused with subjectivity (337). I add, finally, to develop the description of drama one last time, that the "intelligence of a role being performed" is "quasi set *a priori*" (GSG 21, 172).

Are not these *a priori* at the same time answers to the problem of culture and figures of the individual law – the first regarded from an epistemological, the second from a pedagogical perspective? The law of the individual is the general formula of these individual *a priori*. As the Kantian opposition between constitutive *a priori* and

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[52] "Only the historians who possess a highly pronounced spiritual singularity can deeply comprehend and present the historical individualities. The erasure (…) of individuality destroys the possibility of history" (GSG 9, 296).

[53] On this point, see Amat, 2016: 91-94.

regulative idea is overcome by the relativization of the *a priori*,[54] individual law becomes both the condition of possibility and the regulative idea of culture, postulating at each instant, among all the possible paths that one can follow to face the different demands that weigh on the individual, the existence of a best path that leads to an increase in the meaning and value of life. It is therefore the expression of the immanent and mobile, non-foundationalist – but no less valid and objective – norm of the singular relational complex woven by what we designate, for convenience, by means of the abstract concepts of "life" and "objective mind". Since this complex is real, as we saw in our analysis of *Goethe* chapter, the *a priori* that the individual law constitutes should be considered – as well as the *a priori* that makes the history possible – as a "real *a priori*", a "real function" (GSG 9, 235, 241).[55] Impossible to determine fully, the law of the individual is a limit-concept that plays the role of junction between metaphysics and philosophy of culture. Giving its title to the latest chapter of Simmel's "philosophical testament", it tries to express the philosopher's deeper intuition and to solve, in a relationist way, what he once called "[his] problem: the objectification of the subject or rather: the de-subjectification of the individual" (GSG 20: 262).

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[54] See in particular GSG 6, 106 ("the constitutive principles […] have to become regulative ones").

[55] See also GSG 9, 35. On this difficult point see Backhaus, 2003: 224-225, 254-255; Fellmann, 1977: 70-71; Adolf, 2002: 94-98.

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