

# How Is Individuality Possible? Georg Simmel's Philosophy and Sociology of Individualism

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Georg Simmel's Living Heritage

Volume 22, Number 1, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1051006ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051006ar>

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Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Müller, H.-P., Cavalli, A. & Ferrara, A. (2018). How Is Individuality Possible? Georg Simmel's Philosophy and Sociology of Individualism. *Simmel Studies*, 22 (1), 15–43. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1051006ar>

Article abstract

“How is society possible?” The mirror image of Simmel's famous question is: “How is individuality possible?” To answer this question Simmel developed a philosophy and sociology of individualism. The “tragedy of individuality” consists of the hiatus between the social structure offering freedom and individuality and the culture unable to provide the necessary meaning and orientation. This is shown with respect to epistemic, structural, cultural and ethic individuality.

HANS-PETER MÜLLER

*How Is Individuality Possible? Georg Simmel's Philosophy and Sociology of Individualism*

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**Introduction**

"How is society possible?": This famous question is even known to those who are unfamiliar with Georg Simmel's oeuvre. The mirror image question thus reads: "How is individuality possible?" (Müller, 2015). Although Simmel never put this question in such a way he invested much reflection on the modern cultural ideal and analysed the structural as well as the cultural conditions of individuality. It is my thesis that in order to figure out the *secret of individuality* Simmel developed a philosophy *and* a sociology of individualism. This keen research interest of Simmel has often been noted (cf. Coser, 1991; Fellmann, 1994; Isaksen/Waerness, 1993; Kippele, 1998; Pythinen, 2008; Pohlmann, 1987; Schroer, 2001; Watier, 1993) but the multi-faceted approach to this problem seems not to have been spelled out sufficiently in full scope and scale yet. The "tragedy of individuality" as I would like to show consists of the hiatus between the structural evolution opening up the options for freedom and individuality and the cultural development which in turn seem to make the realisation of these

opportunities impossible. In a Weberian language, the “life-chance of individuality” cannot be transformed into a “genuinely individual style of life”. The structure would allow it, but the culture is unable to materialise this chance.

The peculiarity of Simmel’s analysis is that his approach combines philosophy *and* sociology, since Simmel is both, philosopher and sociologist (Müller, 2018). His *philosophy of individuality* examines the preconditions of individuality *per se*. What makes a human being capable of living an individual existence? This part of his analysis could be framed as *epistemological individuality*. On the other hand, he pursues the normative question how modern individuality could be imagined. How would a fulfilled individuality be crafted? And what would a modern individuality look like? This part of his analysis could be framed as *ethical individuality*. His *sociology of individuality* analyses the social structure of society to find out whether there are chances for freedom and individuality. That part of the analysis could be framed as *structural individuality*. Studying the culture of society forms Simmel’s attempt to figure out if there are cultural forms available to fill out the structural chances of freedom and individuality to shape one’s own personality in a meaningful and acknowledged way. This part of the analysis could be framed as *cultural individuality*.

In order to highlight this double structure of individuality – i.e. philosophically and sociologically – the analysis proceeds in four steps. In a first step, we look at epistemological individuality, basically the mechanisms of orientation and positioning. Then, the structural side of societal development will be considered: Social differentiation and the money economy. In a third step, the cultural side of social change will be analysed: the style of life and individualism. Finally, by referring to his moral legacy, the “view of life” and here above all to the fourth chapter on “the individual law”, it will be shown, how individuality is philosophically conceivable, but sociologically rather unlikely to achieve for the average human being. Only great persons and distinguished personalities, i.e. the *patricians*, seem to be able to live according to

their individual law. The mass of people or the *plebs* will have to do with collective patterns of fashion and consumption.

### **Epistemological individuality: The individual in Simmel's thought**

According to Simmel, the human being is constituted in a double fashion that constitutes his particular position in the world and defines “the formal structure of our existence” (Simmel, 2010: 1). First, by his property as a “being of boundaries” (“Grenzwesen”) and second, by his nature as a *homo duplex*. At every time and in each space the human being is determined by two boundaries. “We are continually orienting ourselves, even when we do not employ abstract concepts, to an ‘over us’ and an ‘under us’, to a right and a left, to a more or less, a tighter or looser, a better or worse” (Simmel, 2010: 1). These elementary classifications, as Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (1901/2) put them, give us basic orientation in the world. The more we are fine-tuning these classifications, the sharper may we measure human beings, things, in short: the entire world. Immanuel Kant (1983[1781]) called this “die quantitative Auswitterung des Sozialen”, the “weathering/efflorescence of the social” in his *Critique of pure reason* and Simmel (1992[1908]) “die quantitative Bestimmtheit der Gruppe”, the “quantitative determinateness of the group” in his *Sociology*. Even more, this faculty allows us to define our position in the world. “The boundary above and below is our means for finding direction in the infinite space of our worlds” (Simmel, 2010: 1). *Orientation and positioning* turn out well by the means of boundaries, i.e. the work of inclusion and exclusion, distinctness and limitation which together define “a sort of coordinate system” of and for our life. According to Simmel, this anthropological universal turns man into the “boundary being” (“Grenzwesen”) *par excellence*. In another of his famous paradoxical phrasings Simmel (2010: 1) states: “Along with the fact that we *have* boundaries always and everywhere, so also we *are* boundaries”.

This double nature – to have boundaries and to be boundaries – has a number of important implications:

1. These stipulations define “the constitution of our existence through boundaries” (Simmel, 2010: 2); positioning in the world is the decisive mechanism for man not to get lost in the cosmos. But no boundary is rigid or unchangeable. Quite to the contrary: boundaries in and for life are there to be transcended and insofar boundaries are in constant flux.

2. Human beings, therefore, are not only “boundary beings” but also “boundary transcendents”. By self-reflection and self-transcendence and this is important for Simmel’s concept of individuality, human beings always are in this world and beyond: this is why the individual is able to consider boundaries from both sides - from within and from without.

3. This double nature – to *have* a boundary and to *be* a boundary – leads Simmel to the distinction between “limitating” and “letting go” in order to underline the *relocatability* of boundaries. Simmel illustrates this with respect to the relationship between knowledge and ignorance. His example is the chess player who has to calculate his next moves but not all moves until the end of the game. The same holds true for life: We plan our next steps in order to establish a continuous conduct of life but not until our death. Otherwise life would not be life, i.e. a combination of planning and contingency as well as fate.

4. The relationship between *form* and *content* provides for the poles of *richness* and *determinacy* of life. “The formal structure of our existence” has always to be filled with content. The quantities have to be complemented by qualities, i.e. what Simmel calls intensity, colour, light, accentuation and gradation. For instance, every style needs a cultural idea, which lends its form a unique, qualitative *Gestalt*. Where this content fades away, the style degenerates into hollowness, a decoration or citation. This holds particularly true for the modern style of life determined by money with its options for consumption of goods and services. But if this life style is not part of an overarching system of the conduct of life, it wins in quantitative *determinacy* (“money makes the world go round”) but loses in qualitative *richness* (“the good life”).

Simmel (2010: 2) sums up his reflections on the boundary-character of our existence by another paradox: “we are bounded in every direction, and we are bounded in no direction”.

These reflections on the boundary character of our existence and the dialectic between form and content recurs in his image of man as a *homo duplex*. In his famous excursus on “How is society possible?” Simmel (1971) discusses three *a-priori* qualities defining our existence in society.

1. *The inner point of individuality*: Every human being has an inner point of individuality which neither he nor his fellow citizens will ever be able to catch. This is why we can understand the other only rather intuitively and vaguely. Our perception of the other vacillates between the *type* of man and the *uniqueness* of an individual personality. The consequence thus reads: “All of us are fragments, not only of general man, but also of ourselves” (Simmel, 1971: 10). In everyday life we understand the other by assembling the empirically accessible fragments of the other and by forming a complete picture of him in our perception regardless of the fact if this assessment making for a coherent picture of the other is true or false.

2. *The principle of the “moreover” or the “something else”*: In his dialectic of generality and individuality Simmel adds the principle of the “moreover”. A human being is not just a member of society but rather something *in addition*. With one leg, his mainstay, man is a member of society but with his free leg he pretends to be an individual personality.

Man’s interactions would be quite different if he appeared to others only as what he is in his relevant societal category, as the mere exponent of a social role momentarily ascribed to him. Actually, individuals, as well as occupations and social situations, are differentiated according to how much of the non-social element they possess or allow along with their social content (Simmel, 1971: 13).

3. *The general value of individuality*. The third a priori discusses the preconditions how one manages to belong to society.

An individual is directed towards a certain place within his social milieu by his very quality. This place which ideally belongs to him actually exists. Here we have the preconditions of the individual's social life. It may be called the general value of individuality (Simmel, 1971: 20).

This is, of course, a highly idealised assumption for the model of a perfect integration of the individual into society. Simmel is fully aware of the idealised character of this a priori.

This harmony, of course, does not preclude violent ethical and eudaemonistic dissonances. If social reality were determined by this presupposition of harmony alone, without the interference of other factors, it would result in the perfect society. It would be perfect, however, not in the sense of ethical or eudaemonistic perfection, but of conceptual perfection; it would not be the *perfect* society but the perfect *society* (Simmel, 1971: 20 f.)

In order to make this abstract argument somewhat clearer, Simmel refers to *vocation* as the bridge between individual and society and *bureaucracy* as a perfect organisation of society.

We have summed up under the notion of *epistemological individuality* the two qualities of man as a "boundary being" and as a *homo duplex*. It remains to be seen how those preconditions of individuality are met by the structural constitution of modern society.

### **Structural individuality: Social differentiation and the money economy**

Simmel captures the basic structural constitution of modern society by the two features of social differentiation and the money economy. *Social differentiation* in turn consists of three processes (Müller, 1993): 1. The division of labour; 2. Role differentiation; 3.

Functional differentiation. Similar to Adam Smith, Herbert Spencer and Karl Marx before him and Émile Durkheim as his contemporary Simmel sees in the *division of labour* the decisive trigger for social structure and change. In his treatise “Über sociale Differenzierung” (1989a[1890]) he counts the “principle of energy saving” (“Kraftersparnis”) as among the most important mechanisms to drive productivity and an efficient allocation of resources. Besides economic growth, the division of labour entails the specialisation of the labour force via occupational differentiation and professionalization alleviating the competition among workers.

Alongside the division of labour there is a second process Simmel stresses: *role differentiation*. The more economic and social circles as well as the group unit are widened, the greater are the chances for developing one’s own individuality. This process of a parallel extension of group size and individuality is strengthened by the internal differentiation of the group thus grown. The bigger the group, the higher the likelihood, that the large group dissects into smaller sub groups. To the extent that the individual is crosscutting social circles, the margin for his freedom grows. Since the individual has to coordinate different role expectations, this work of coordination offers action space and room for the manipulation of one’s role expectation in favour of one’s own freedom. Group extension and crosscutting social circles prompt individuality and open up space for freedom as the sociology of roles and groups has vividly shown in its empirical research.

Role differentiation on the social and individual level corresponds to the *functional differentiation* on the societal level. To the extent that the division of labour grows, more and more functions are differentiated and establish themselves as functional realms or systems. These systems like the economy, science or law, Simmel (1990: 441) calls “the purely formal and indifferent forces of life” (“die rein formalen und indifferenten Lebensmächte”, 1989b, GSG 6: 609) which establish their own “frameworks for creative life” (Simmel, 1971: 375) or, much more precisely in German, “Gehäuse des schöpferischen Lebens” (Simmel, 1987: 148), tending to their



own values and norms thereby injecting “those contradictions into the totality of life” (Simmel, 1990: 442).

Paradigmatic for these “purely formal and indifferent forces of life” (Simmel, 1990: 441) is the *money economy*. Money is for Simmel symbol and medium at once. Therefore he seeks to determine the effects a money economy has on social life and its relationships. First of all, money is the *symbol* of modern life:

There is no more striking symbol of the completely dynamic character of the world than that of money. (...) Money is nothing but the vehicle for a movement in which everything else that is not in motion will be extinguished. It is, as it were, an *actus purus* (Simmel, 1990: 510 f.).

Secondly, money is *the medium* because it connects all parts of economy and society and like blood and its circulation it furnishes those parts with energy. As a consequence of this ubiquity, money imprints all social relations in modern society. Social relationships thus are matter-of-fact like, objective, levelled and calculable since they all succumb to the standard of money. This equal affectedness by money represents only one side of the coin. The other side pertains to the social distance and the social inequality money creates among people.

We can sum up Simmel’s structural analysis of social differentiation and the money economy. These powerful processes enhance the growth of society but also open up chances for freedom and individuality. Yet, this growth in “freedom chances” exemplifies only a *negative* freedom, a *freedom from* society and its impositions. But what about *positive* freedom, i.e. a *freedom to* a sovereign conduct of life? In order to answer this question, we have to turn to Simmel’s discussion of the cultural realm.

## Cultural individuality: Genealogy of Individualism, cultivation and the style of life

Whereas Simmel's structural analysis draws a quite optimistic relationship between social differentiation and individuality, his cultural analysis is deeply sceptical if this "freedom from" societal constraints can be transformed into a "freedom to" a life fulfilled with freedom and individuality. The shift in the worldview from the cosmos to the universe has destroyed "the great chain of being" (Lovejoy, 1936) and a common sense for the world we live in. The transition from the "substance of values" to the "relativity of values" has undermined the deep faith in the meaning and value of social and individual life. What remains is the great longing and thirst for individuality. But where does this need come from?

Time and again, Simmel (1995a[1901], 1995b[1904], 2001a[1912], 2001b[1913] and 2003a[1913], 1999b[1917], 1999c[1918]) analyses the sources of individuality and individualism. For him, it is absolutely clear that idea and ideal are very modern. In order to arrive at a coordinate system, he distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative individualism. Historically speaking, the *quantitative individualism* is a child of the enlightenment and puts forward the idea of *freedom*. Fighting the *Ancien Régime* the emancipation from traditional rights seems to imply the realisation of a freedom for all. If everybody is emancipated, everybody will be free. The freedom for all implies the equality of all and thus the realisation of the good society is accomplished at once. The following crucial questions: What comes after freedom? And how does a freedom to lead a life in autonomy look like?, are left without answer. The major result from this period are the human rights in which equality and freedom tend to coincide.

In the 19th century these two ideals – equality and freedom – go separate ways. It is in *socialism* that the value of *equality* reigns supreme in order to dismantle social inequality and to pursue a politics of levelling to attain social justice in an egalitarian society. On the other hand, it is in *qualitative individualism* that the value of

*freedom* reigns supreme, and equality is substituted by inequality or, in (post)modern parlance, *diversity*. Not to be like all the others but to be different becomes the new ideal, i.e. uniqueness and incommensurability. For Simmel, this latest stage short-circuited the structural evolution of social differentiation on the one hand, the cultural development of individualism on the other hand. “With the individualism of being different, the deepening of individuality up to the incommensurability of its nature as well as its achievement one feels called to – now the metaphysics of the division of labour was found” (Simmel, 1999b [1917]: 148, my translation).

At the end, Simmel refrains from advocating a *normative solution*. What he presents though is a neat yet pessimistic *diagnosis of the times*:

The lack of something definite at the centre of the soul impels us to search for momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations and external activities. Thus it is that we become entangled in the instability and helplessness that manifests itself as the tumult of the metropolis, as the mania for travelling, as the wild pursuit of competition and as the typically modern disloyalty with regard to taste, style, opinions and personal relationships (Simmel, 1990: 484).

### **Ethical Individuality: The individual law**

This pessimistic outlook at the end of the “Philosophy of Money”, however, is not Simmel’s last word. In his philosophy of life he sets out to solve the “tragedy of individuality” by finding an ethical foundation for this ‘metaphysics of the division of labour’. He called it quite paradoxically: “The individual law”. Laws are typically regarded as general because of their common validity and not as individual. How does a “law” for one person only look like? Once again, Simmel’s vantage point is Kant but only to overcome the moral system of Kantianism.

Simmel was always a good Kantian with respect to his epistemology but not to his ethics. The categorical imperative never was able to convince Simmel. Furthermore, Kant’s dualisms had to

be overcome by a “third” as Simmel’s favourite formula reads (Susman, 1959). Instead of a dualism like ‘life’ and ‘ought’ Simmel conceived a triad of ‘reality’, ‘ought’ and ‘life’. Meaning and orientation do not come from above as in an eternal substantial ethics but from within life. It is the individual who has to figure out “from within” an ethical law which would give a directive for the individual self-realisation and a *telos* for the life chosen. Simmel’s solution reminds us of Weber’s (1973: 613; cf. Müller, 2007: 258) famous demon who would reign the threads of one’s life. Yet Simmel would have criticised Weber’s solution as irrational, arbitrary and fateful. In his version and vision it is a conscious determination of an ethical law, which then would steer the entire conduct of life of an individual existence. Simmel (2010: 142) imagines an objective ‘ought’ for the individual, the demand imposed from *his* life onto *his* life and in principle independent of whether he really recognizes it or not. In its structure, Simmel’s individual law reminds us of the Puritan ethics in its rigidity, consistency, consequentiality and life long arrangement. Here and there, a strict moral regime governs the conduct of one’s soul and life until one’s death. Yet the modern individual does not serve a foreign, invisible God but his own soul and its inner-worldly salvation. If social differentiation and complexity of society have grown too big, and a pluralistic culture is unable to offer meaning and orientation, it is up to the individual to support one’s own ethical self-determination. Life thus has to be turned into an ethical oeuvre in order to escape the anomie of culture and one’s own distress. Ethical individuality thus means simply put: Make your own rules and follow them consistently. Only a human life able to create an individual law in this sense is worth living and can count as a life fulfilled.

Therefore, Simmel’s studies on individuality achieved in philosophy and art are able to vitalize his over-abstract considerations on the individual law. In a number of philosophical portraits about cases of individuality fully realised he sought to figure out determinants and factors crucial for this aim. In the realm

of *philosophy* he dealt above all with Kant (1997[1904]), Kant and Goethe (1995c[1906]), but also with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (1995d[1907]). It is interesting to note that he pursued the idealistic and individualistic line of philosophy but not the materialistic and collectivistic line of Hegel, Marx and Engels despite his early sympathy for social democracy and socialism. But the levelling approach frightened the convinced individualist Georg Simmel. Like Heinrich Heine, he perceived the necessity and importance of socialism but like Bartleby, he would have preferred not to live under its reign.

In the realm of *art* he was interested in the great artists like Michelangelo as a creator, Raffael as a framer, the modernity of Rodin's sculptures, the poetry of Stefan George, the paintings of Rembrandt but above all the genius of Goethe. Simmel devoted a monography to Rembrandt (2003b[1916]) and to Goethe (2003a[1913]). Whereas in his studies on Rembrandt he discussed the possibilities of a philosophy of art as well as the implicit religious vein involved in Rembrandt's art, in Goethe it is the form of life called "Goethe" itself which attracts him and leads to a life-long preoccupation with this *'magister lud'* (Hesse, 1943).

Why Goethe? What defines his unique greatness and unsurpassed *grandeur*? It is Goethe (1820) himself who demanded human beings to live according to their inner demon and *telos* (Urworte. Orphisch: *Daimon*, "geprägte Form die lebend sich entwickelt" or "printed form that develops itself vitally"). It is Goethe who in his personality embodies the two forms of individualism in such a convincing manner that he obviously managed to live the "third" thereby overcoming the one-sidedness of the different types of individualism. By combining quantitative and qualitative individualism Goethe demonstrated ideal and reality of individuality and a sovereign conduct of life for Simmel. In his language, Goethe realised "more life" and "more than life".

His study on Goethe makes from the outset clear in a most radical way that his interpretation is neither directed at his biography nor at his oeuvre. Instead, he is interested in the "Urphänomen" or

the archetypical phenomenon: “What is the spiritual meaning of Goethe’s existence in the first place?” (Simmel, 2003a: 9; my translation). In order to answer this complex and complicated question he takes the reader on a long and protracted journey touching upon ‘life and work’, ‘truth’, ‘the unity of the world elements’ as well as ‘the separatedness of the world elements’, ‘individualism’, ‘accountability and overcoming’, ‘love’ and ‘development’. What are his major insights? He shows that the young Goethe pursued the qualitative individualism whereas the old Goethe followed the quantitative individualism thereby opening up the avenue for a ‘third way’ as a bridge to a kind of ‘metaphysical individuality’.

The metaphysical view of individuality may attain its fully evocative plenty and vital arrangement if the primordial colouring that expresses the individual in his uniqueness flows through the totality of existence around the individual and be able to align it to oneself. The human being is only an individual if it is not just a point in the world but is itself a world and that this is so can only be demonstrated by his quality to determine a potential world view, as the core of a spiritual cosmos where all of its single statements are only partial manifestations of its individual totality (Simmel, 2003a: 169; my translation).

Yet in a mystical and mysterious way, this even seems to be able to transcend all known types of individualism in favour of a new collective entity. As Goethe (2003a: 27) himself once remarked: “*Mon oeuvre est celle d’un être collectif et elle porte le nom de Goethe*” (cf. Müller, 2010: 172).

## **Conclusion**

Simmel is the philosopher and sociologist who has constructed an entire research program to analyse individuality under modernity. He conceptualizes the relationship between individual and society as the main object of his sociology in a particular fashion. He pursues neither an action nor a system frame of reference. His

approach is neither micro- nor macrosociological in its orientation. Rather, he chose the way ‘in-between’ of social interaction as “Wechselwirkung” was translated into English. He chose the ‘bridge’ between micro and macro, between action and structure. This is why the logical counterpart to his question “How is society possible?” is the problem “How is individuality possible?”. In his complex oeuvre he gives four interrelated answers as I tried to show. The peculiarity of his approach consists of a philosophy *and* a sociology of individuality.

1. *Epistemological individuality*: The human being is a “boundary being” as well as a “boundary transcender”. Self-domestication and self-transcendence allow him to develop a zone of and for himself, a sanctuary of the Self because as a dual entity man is a part of society and apart from society.

2. *Structural individuality*: The structural differentiation of society makes room for freedom and individuality of the modern human being yet the crosscutting of social circles enables a “freedom from” society without a “freedom for” a sovereign conduct of life.

3. *Cultural individuality*: The “tragedy of modern culture” – the hiatus between objective and subjective culture – mirrors the “tragedy of modern individuality”. If the modern individual is by no means able to acquire the plenty of modern culture how will he or she be able to dispose of the means for individual self-realisation? Simmel, however, provides languages of quantitative and qualitative individualism, which define what is at stake. In his sociology Simmel refuses to give a normative solution for this problem. But a privileged minority might be able to form an ‘aristocratic individuality’ whereas the majority has to cope with fashion and mass consumption.

4. *Ethical individuality*: At the end of a long process of civilization neither a complex society nor a hypertrophic objective culture are able to support sufficiently the subjective culture of individuals. What remains is a return to a ‘catholic’ way of life in the original sense of the term. “The individual law” is self-made, strong and

strict a life long. It provides meaning to one's life, creates motivation for "more life" and "more than life". Insofar the individual soul lost under modern conditions regains orientation for a life-course of and on one's own. Simmel's studies of fulfilled individuality confirm the bearing capacity of his concept of the individual law at least for fine natures like Rembrandt or Goethe.

What about a *retour à Simmel* in the 21st century? Today it seems as if the third pillar of modern society besides capitalism and democracy, that is individualism, holds hegemonic sway over the people and their souls: Individuality as a fate and normative imposition for every man and every woman. This 'everybody'-form is an 'individuality light' devoid of the hard ethical labour to find an "individual law". It may even take the form of singularity instead of individuality and thus amount to a "society of singularities" (Reckwitz, 2017). Yet, it would be interesting to study empirical forms and manifestations of today's individualism with the conceptual approach of Georg Simmel.

How would have Simmel reacted to this imposture of individualism? Maybe in the same way as in his review of Julius Langbehn's (1890) bestseller "Rembrandt als Erzieher" criticizing him for his hollow individualism. Simmel's (1999a: 232 f.; my translation) critique is worth citing:

If instead of the spirit of levelling the claim for individualization is raised, one needs to ask what is said and done with it, if individualization is not just a formal principle expecting to receive its value from the content and the kind of individualities. [...] If it referred throughout to bad individualities, nothing but formations of the ludicrous, the strange or the immoral, the levelling toward a modest average character would certainly be preferred. The most important thing what kind of individuality should be built is demoted to a question of a secondary order and individuality as such – an in and for itself empty and in its value completely problematic form – is put at the head of the march into the future.



Already the young Simmel draws a sharp distinction between the serious and hard labour to craft a form of genuine individuality and the superficial pretensions of an egotistic ‘individuality’ à la Langbehn. It may not come as a surprise that the old Simmel goes as far as his own role-model Goethe and bears hopes for a new ideal of modern culture: Beyond individuality, yet without a loss for the personality and with new horizons for the relationship between individual and society, subject and culture. Simmel thus expresses his hopes for the future of mankind:

I would rather like to believe that the idea of an absolutely free personality and the one of an absolutely unique personality are not the last words of individualism; that the labour of mankind shall bring up more, and ever more diverse forms with which the personality can approve herself und prove the value of her existence. And if in happy periods this diversity may be ordered into harmonies, yet her contradiction and the struggle of that labour is not only an obstacle, but calls upon her to new developments of power and leads her to new creations (1999b: 149).

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## COMMENTARIES TO MÜLLER

ALESSANDRO CAVALLI

### **“How is individuality possible?” Cultural conditions of a modern cultural ideal**

Hans-Peter Müller’s reconstruction of Georg Simmel’s treatment of individuality is accurate and convincing. It’s true that Simmel mixes different approaches and it is hard to distinguish the boundary between what is philosophical and what is sociological, what is a positive way of looking to the idea of individuality and what is a normative or a moral perspective. To structure the argument at three levels (the epistemological, the societal and the cultural) is a clever solution for the exposure of the thinking of an author known for his apparently un-systematic way of argumentation. Simmel’s thinking has been described as “sociological impressionism” and in fact the theoretical statements lay often at a deeper layer in his texts and the reader and interpreter ought to dig under the surface in order to shed light into them, to find out that they are rather solid constructions. In my opinion Simmel’s impressionism has been largely overstressed.

My comments will add some further arguments to support Hans-Peter Müller’s reconstruction of Simmel’s approach.

I think one should not forget the intellectual climate in which Simmel’s conception of the individual was conceived. It was the time around the turn of the Century immediately preceding the time in which a number of thinkers started to elaborate the concept of mass and mass society. Ortega Y Gasset’s book “The Revolt of the Masses” is only a few decades posterior and several Simmel’s texts

were very likely available to Ortega. It seems to me that the idea of the individual assumes a crucial dimension in opposition to the idea of the masses, even if the latter one emerges at a later stage after - on the one hand with the Russian revolution and, on the other hand, the Fascist regime. As Hans-Peter Müller rightly refers the ideal of the individual portrayed in a series of monographs Simmel devoted to exceptional personalities (Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Rodin and, specifically, Goethe) reflect a conception of the individual which finds expression in ‘aristocratic’ personalities of exceptional intellectual, artistic and moral dimension. Precisely the kind of individuals opposed to the type David Riesman described later as members of “the lonely crowd”. This confirms that Simmel’s discussion should be located in its historical context. Simmel’s ideal of the individual was shaped in the atmosphere of Spengler’s “decline of the West”, thought in relationship with the ‘rise of the masses’. Masses are not considered in this perspective as social actors struggling for the emancipation of humanity and therefore also of individuals, but as instruments of domination of passive beings.

I would like however to underline one other, more specific sociological aspect that Hans-Peter Müller touches only in a short passage. I would like to focus on some implications of the fact that Simmel locate at the centre of his sociological theoretical frame the concept of *Wechselwirkung*, a concept not adequately translated into English (or by the way in any other language) with *interaction*. *Wechselwirkung* is the corner stone of a sociological approach in terms of ‘relations’ and specifically of ‘reciprocal relations’. This concept is at the heart of a vision of society as a ‘network’ and of individuals (subjects) as elements defined by the multiple relationships among them. It is not the subjects who define the relation, but the relation that defines the subjects. Since each subject is involved in a plurality of complex relations, there are as many subjects as there are relations. In my view Simmel anticipated here the idea of the “multiple ego”, or the “multiple self”. Not only, since each relation is a reciprocal relation, the individual (the subject)

emerges out of a plurality of recognitions, but also because she/he is faced with the task of keeping some kind of integration among his or her multiple identities. The idea of ‘recognition’ (*Anerkennung*) is obviously involved in the dimension of reciprocity, as it is clearly stated when Simmel discusses the ‘first a-priori’. The recognition by the ‘other’ involves however only one limited segment of what we may now call ‘ego identity’, multiple recognitions are the pieces of the puzzle the subject needs to construct his or her identity.

This way of thinking could be cast also in terms of “role theory”, since ‘roles’ are made of relations normatively structured. However an approach in terms of roles is reductive since not all relations can be adequately described in terms of ‘role relations’ or in terms of ‘social differentiation’. Some relations have a strong emotional content, some have mostly cognitive content, and others are defined by their moral content. Money relations tend to be deprived of emotional and/or moral content. In principle, however, all relations are a mixture of emotional, cognitive and moral aspects. The individual emerges as a ‘work of art’ (more or less successful) keeping together these different dimensions.

As I have argued elsewhere (2009), Simmel’s conception of the individual was not too far from the psychoanalytic idea of a complex construction of interdependent layers of Ego, Superego and Es. In several passages of his “Soziologie”, Simmel stresses the self reflective capacity that enables the subject to become an object of him/herself and in the illuminating essay on “the lie” (“Zur Psychologie und Soziologie der Lüge”) he discusses the process of “self deception” which is impossible to conceive without thinking of the individual as complex unity of multiple layers in reciprocal tensions. In the same essay Simmel talks of the individual as “betrogener Betrüger” and of the “merkwürdige und folgenreiche Fähigkeit des Ich, sich selbst in zwei Parteien zu spalten (...) von denen die eine bejaht was die andere verneint ” and he uses the concept of ‘*Selbstachtung*’ (self respect or self esteeme) to underline the capacity of the subject to deny to him/herself that he/she is lying to him/herself (Simmel, 1992: 418).

All these passages are further elements to understand how he was the son of his historical time, but also capable to anticipate scientific and cultural developments which emerged in later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Simmel's individual is self-reflective, capable to observe himself with the eyes of the 'other', but also to hide his or her dark sides he or she is unwilling and/or unable to recognize.

I am not aware how far Simmel was familiar with Sigmund Freud writings. The fact that he was able to read some of Freud's early works is not unlikely. They were of the same age (Freud was born 1856, Simmel 1858) and when Simmel died Freud was already a well-known and discussed personality. As far as I know, the task of comparing some convergent elements of these two thinkers is still unaccomplished. I would like to invite some younger colleague to try to follow this path.

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ALESSANDRO FERRARA

### **Simmel and Exemplary Normativity**

Of all the classics of sociology, Simmel has certainly suffered a belated recognition, perhaps not unrelated to the enormous influence of Parsons' paradigm-setting work of 1937 – "The Structure of Social Action" – which excluded him from the venerable triad of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. The 100th anniversary of his death is certainly a proper occasion for remedying this wrong, and the paper on which I am commenting certainly has the merit of drawing our attention to the main reason why Simmel



deserves to be considered one of the most illustrious founding fathers of sociology.

I have read Prof. Müller's paper with great interest and have learned a lot from it. I find myself in total agreement with his choice of having his interpretation of Simmel's multifaceted lifework revolve around the question "How is individuality possible?". I consider that question as part of a Simmelian program 1) that includes the exploration of *Wechselwirkungen* or complexes of interacting factors that together add up to a meaningful social constellation (where the reconstruction of *Wechselwirkung* cuts across the binaries of *Erklären* and *Verstehen*, social structure and action); that 2) frees the sociological imagination from the spell of law like causality; and, finally, 3) focuses on the process of *Vergesellschaftung* or sociation – namely, the process whereby sediments of structure emerge from the fluidity of interaction, a focus not so different from the attention that Freud, in the same years, paid to the sedimentation of psychic structure (the Ego, the Id and the Super-Ego) out of the fluidity of drives and their vicissitudes.

I also fully endorse Prof. Müller's qualification of Simmel's approach to individuality as both sociological and philosophical. My three comments will concern a slightly different appraisal of that philosophical significance. Of the four distinct perspectives from which the meaning of individuality can be addressed – the epistemological, the structural, the cultural and the ethical one – I will focus on the *ethical* one.

Let me start by addressing one point that we might want to think further over. Living by the "individual law", Müller points out, is "only for great persons and distinguished personalities, i.e. the *patricians* (...). The mass of people or the *plebs* will have to do with collective patterns of fashion and consumption". That is correct, but it should be emphasised that Simmel understands individuality against a deeply European context, where exemplarity, being a law unto oneself, is the prerogative of the few. The revolution only happened in politics, if it ever occurred. When it comes to culture, the Ancien Régime still held sway at the end of the 19th century: the

unsurpassable exquisiteness of taste displayed by the Duke of Guermantes remains forever beyond the reach of *nouveau riches* and *parvenus*, let alone of the uncultivated masses. As a term of comparison, consider the ‘democratic individualism’ embodied, on the other side of the ocean, by Thoreau, Emerson and Walt Whitman and resting on the idea that a life lived under democratic institutions puts *everyone* in a position to pursue fulfilment, inner resonance, and to experiment with social forms. Simmel's theorizing about individuality would have gained further inspirational value if supplemented by a reflection on the social context of which instead it remained hostage.

My second comment concerns the dual path of evolution of the culture of individuality in the 19th century and beyond. From the split between so-called “quantitative” and “qualitative” individualism after the fall of the Ancien Régime, two rival political cultures unfolded: one that emphasised equality among citizens (from revolutionary socialism to social-democracy to liberal socialism) and one that emphasizes freedom and uniqueness, ‘difference’ in today's parlance. These two strands, however, have a common point of origin in Rousseau. The author of the *Social Contract* and of *The New Heloise* unifies these two lines through a critique of the competitive mechanism of social reproduction at work in modern society and of its negative effects on the individual.

Furthermore, Müller points out that Simmel refrains from offering a “normative solution” to his pessimistic *Zeitdiagnose*. Yet it seems to me that implicitly he does, and this leads me to my third comment. The “*individual law*”, in no way comparable with the oppressive rigidity and consequentiality of the Puritan ethics, is Simmel's greatest contribution towards a normativity for late modernity, on a par with Rousseau's implicit *ethic of authenticity* and with Arendt's model of exemplary validity based on Kant's reflective judgment.

“Das individuelle Gesetz” outlines a singular normativity which amounts to one of the most interesting proposals for making normativity compatible with the Rawlsian ‘fact of pluralism’. The

theme of Simmel's 1913 essay is the relation of the universality of the moral law to the individuality of the individual.

Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* is the polemical target. Simmel objects to connecting 'particularity' with what is 'real' and 'universality' with what is 'ideal' or, in a language closer to us, with 'facts' and 'norms'. Not everything that is individual is merely factual and thus *particular*. Not everything that is normative has necessarily to be *general*. This is a fully *normative* thesis. Ironically, argues Simmel with a kind of judo-like philosophical move, it is the universality of the moral law that fails to be adequately accounted for by the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In fact, the categorical imperative turns out to be something particular "insofar as it stands over against individuality", as duty pitted against inclination (Simmel, 1987: 179). To the extent that the moral law sets itself over against my own uniqueness, it fails to be truly *universal*. It certainly fails to include *me*, it appears to be just another 'particular' of a size larger than my own subjectivity. Thus by setting up an opposition between the universality of the moral law and the singularity of the individual, Kant ends up undermining the very universality of the law.

Another limitation of Kant's moral philosophy is that only isolated actions are assessed. Kant "separates the action – lie or truth-telling, goodhearted or cruel acts – from the actor, treats it as a logical and free-floating material for moral considerations, and then raises the question concerning its permissibility" (Simmel, 1987: 182).

Instead, as Simmel writes from a '*lebensphilosophische*' perspective shared with Bergson and Nietzsche:

intrinsically life does not consist in the summation of a lie, then of a courageous decision, then of a debauched extravagance, then of a good work, but in a continuous flow, within which each moment represents the totality that unceasingly forms and transforms itself. Within life as a totality no part is separated from any other by sharp boundaries and each part shows its meaning only within the totality and when considered from the standpoint of it (Simmel, 1987: 188).

The generalization test at the basis of Kant's ethics only works, instead, if we overlook the fact that the same act acquires different moral valences within two different lives. The test is not amendable. If we tried to improve it by accounting holistically for the meaning of action, continues Simmel, the test would put us in the absurd position of wondering whether we may want that “the totality of one's life” be generalised and become a law for everybody else or whether we may want that everybody else become “us” (Simmel, 1987: 190). How can I will that the totality of my life should, via hypothetical generalization, give rise to an infinite series of I's that are exact replicas of my own?

Interesting is also the normative view of individual dignity that Simmel opposes to Kant's. The dignity of the individual stems not from self-legislation, or from having its practical-rational part shape the whole conduct of the self, but from its ability to reflect and bring to realisation “the whole of life – obviously not in its extension, but in its meaning, in its essence – and to do so in a specific, individual and unique way” (Simmel, 1987: 207). This epiphany of life within the life of each person – the core of Simmelian ‘dignity’ – is not different from the manifestation of aesthetic value: “every part of the work of art is what it is only by virtue of the fact that every other part is what it is and the meaning of each part somehow includes the meaning of the whole work of art” (Simmel, 1987: 209).

Moving on to the *pars construens* of Simmel's essay, the impression that he refrains from articulating a normative point may be generated by his refusal to formulate ‘a new moral *principle*’. The ‘ought’ and ‘reality’ are both part of *life*. This is not to say, however, that the ‘ought’ with which every individual must come to terms is determined by the opinion that the individual has of it. The individual law is not given by the uniqueness of one's life as perceived by the moral actor: this makes of the individual law not a descriptive but a fully *normative* construct. The actor's perception is but *one* element among many. The internal access to the meaning of one's life does not preclude the possibility of committing an error, according to Simmel, when one has to sort out what is central and

what is peripheral. The ‘ought’ of the individual moral law must rather be anchored in a *judgment* which possesses a kind of objectivity *sui generis*. As Simmel puts it: “if a life individualized in a certain way exists, also its corresponding ought (*Sollen*) exists as objectively valid, and we can conceive of true and false representations of it on the part of both the subject of such life and other subjects” (Simmel, 1987: 217). While other moral actors are simply in a less favourable position for assessing what the moral law requires of the moral subject, the moral subject’s direct access to the circumstances of his life does not in and of itself guarantee the validity of his appraisal of the individual law.

This insistence on the independence of the individual law from the subject’s representation of it allows Simmel to distinguish his ethics based on the individual law from a “hedonistic ethics of self-realization”. To equate the individual law with the pursuit of one’s happiness would amount to what Simmel calls “a naive lack of differentiation” (Simmel, 1987: 226). In fact, an ethic of the individual law, as he points out, may be even more demanding than an ethic based on general principles. Certain minor infractions and certain misdemeanours can, if appraised in connection with and as indicative of our personality, acquire a much larger moral import (Simmel 1987: 227). In fact, our awareness that a fragment of our life-conduct reflects the whole of our life cannot but increase our sense of “responsibility vis-a-vis our whole life-history” (Simmel, 1987: 228).

To sum up and conclude: Simmel’s work on “ethical individuality”, *pace* Müller, does amount to a *fully normative* position. Its family resemblance with another ethical notion – Weber’s *ethics of responsibility* – which in a different vocabulary nonetheless presses similar concerns and points in the same direction, ought to be explored. On a larger scale, both the individual law and the ethics of responsibility are the greatest contributions that the sociological tradition offered for rethinking normativity along singular and exemplary lines (Ferrara, 2008: 16-61), in the 1910’s, before the Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian Linguistic Turn questioned the

Enlightenment-type “normativity of principles” and opened up a debate on the sources of normativity that is still fully underway today. Well ahead of their times, those two notions contain an inspiring response to a challenge that had yet to be raised.

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