

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>**SPECIAL SECTION “Fictioning Social Theory: The Use of Fiction to Enrich, Inform, and Challenge the Theoretical Imagination”****The Tragi-Comic Lives of Theory:
Values of a Simmelian Existence*****Thomas Kemple**

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Abstract

The philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel made repeated efforts throughout his career to address the crisis of modern culture by drawing on a wide repertoire of scholarly discourses and imaginative fictions. An overlooked and unique feature of his early works include humorous vignettes and free-verse poems in pseudonymous pieces published in the avant-garde journal *Jugend*. In later writings, he advances his own life-philosophy through an idiosyncratic use of Goethe’s scientific, autobiographical, and literary works in an attempt to articulate what is distinctive about the modern worldview. Focussing on these lesser-known writings reveals the tragi-comic character of his approach to modern individuality in a variety of cultural spheres, and in the life of theory itself. Like Simmel’s vitalist quest for the archetype or “primary phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) [...] of the idea of Goethe” and in his formulation of “the values of Goethean Life”, this essay offers a kind of theorizing *about* the “spiritual meaning (*geistige Sinn*) of Simmelian existence” in its many forms of expression. Although Simmel’s ideas may seem antiquated to us now, recovering what might be called his ‘theory-fictions’ is essential if the humanities and social sciences are to address the most pressing problems we face in the 21st century.

Keywords

Simmel, Goethe, life-philosophy, analogy, theory-fiction

* This essay reproduces, revises, and expands on some ideas presented in my recent book, *Simmel* (Kemple 2018b). I would like to thank the audience members at the Georg Simmel Conference in Portbou, Spain, 4–6 October 2018 for their comments on an earlier version of this paper, and especially our hosts Natàlia Cantó-Milà and Swen Seebach.

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Las vidas tragicómicas de la teoría: valores de la existencia simmeliana

Resumen

Durante su carrera, el filósofo y sociólogo Georg Simmel se esforzó repetidamente en tratar la crisis de la cultura moderna recurriendo a un amplio repertorio de discursos académicos y ficciones imaginativas. Sus primeras obras tienen un rasgo único y pasado por alto, como son las viñetas humorísticas y las poesías en verso libre, en obras con seudónimo en la revista de vanguardia *Jugend*. En escritos posteriores, avanza en su propia filosofía de vida por medio del uso idiosincrático de la obra literaria, autobiográfica y científica de Goethe, en un intento de expresar qué caracteriza la cosmovisión moderna. Si nos centramos en estos escritos menos conocidos, descubrimos el carácter tragicómico de su enfoque de la individualidad moderna en una serie de esferas culturales y en la vida de la misma teoría. Al igual que la búsqueda vitalista de Simmel del arquetipo o «fenómeno primario (Urphänomen) [...] de la idea de Goethe» y su formulación de «los valores de la vida goethiana», este artículo ofrece una especie de teorización sobre el «significado espiritual (geistige Sinn)» de la existencia simmeliana en sus muchas formas de expresión. Aunque puede que las ideas de Simmel nos parezcan anticuadas hoy en día, es esencial recuperar lo que podríamos llamar sus «teoría-ficciones» si las humanidades y las ciencias sociales quieren tratar los problemas más acuciantes a los cuales nos enfrentamos en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave

Simmel, Goethe, filosofía de vida, analogía, teoría-ficción

Introduction: On 'Theory-Fictions' in the Work of Simmel

Throughout his life the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel (1858—1918) was preoccupied with the limits and possibilities of individual freedom in the modern world, not only as a personal concern for himself but also as a sociological reality and psychological experience for everyone. He views freedom as an aesthetic, ethical, metaphysical problem that must be addressed on a cosmic as well as on a human or personal scale. His early writings in ethics, such as *Introduction to Moral Science* (1893-94), and aesthetics, such as "Sociological Aesthetics" (1898), include discussions of the creativity and liberty of the individual. His later sociological and philosophical works, such as *Fundamental Problems of Sociology* (1917) and *The View of Life* (1918), likewise consider how personal autonomy is both enhanced and inhibited by the expansion of mass society (see Kemple 2018a for a comprehensive list of Simmel's works in English translation). In the concluding paragraph of *Main Problems of Philosophy* (1910), one of his most widely read books during his lifetime, he characterizes the conflict of duties and responsibilities placed on individuals as the condition for freely taking up a position in the world and adopting a perspective on life: "the ideal demands of the world in us and of us in the world are deeply bound together... Between them lies what one might call the view of life [*Lebensanschauung*]" ([1910] 1996, p. 157). Simmel's creative autonomy as a thinker and his imaginative freedom as a writer can likewise be understood as a view, intuition, or notion (*Anschauung*) which may be invented as well as discovered through the course of a life, as much a fact that is given as a fiction in the making.

Simmel completed his own *View of Life* in the final weeks before he died, calling this work "my testament" and writing to his friends Max and Marianne Weber in a triumphant tone that he can now consider his life complete: "My life presents itself to me as an unexpected closure. ... I leave at the right moment without any regret or resignation" (2008b, p. 1024). The last chapter of this work, "The Individual Law", is indeed presented as a kind of definitive philosophical statement on life as a whole and on the difference between a singular life both as it *is* and as it *ought to be* lived. Simmel's own personal life does not seem to follow only a *tragic* pattern, as if enacting the ruin, misfortune, or even catastrophe of existence. By his own account, his final years also follow a *comic* story line, not in the sense that his life unfolds humourously or ends happily, but to the extent that it "is or becomes the Absolute" by expressing "the universal at work" in the particular (Zupančič, 2008, p. 27). Simmel himself expresses this contrast and complementarity of the tragic and comic aspects of life through his use of a variety of literary genres. In an aphorism from his journal he writes that "in tragedy, outward chance is inward necessity – in comedy, outward necessity is inward chance" (2010, p. 183). In what follows I argue that the narrative and poetic structure of his social theory itself draws on the rhetorical conventions and hermeneutic resources of both tragedy and comedy. At times he emphasizes how *a universal fate is enacted and internalized by individuals*, and at other times he stresses how *an individual's fate plays out and exemplifies a universal pattern*.

Although Simmel does not view his own life in such dramatic terms, he often characterizes the whole of modern life and its worldview in figural language as tragic to the core (Button, 2012), just as he frequently highlights the comical aspects of particular

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occasions and situations in everyday life. In taking this unorthodox approach to sociological questions and philosophical problems, he tends to resort to analogies and other rhetorical figures that are more common in literary texts. In his famous essay on mental life in modern metropolises, for example, he draws an analogy between how a plumb line is used to check the depth of a body of water from its surfaces and his own method of tacking back and forth between the particular manifestations and the profound dynamics of city life: "But here too, this entire task of these observations becomes obvious, namely, that from each point on the surface of existence – however closely attached to the surface alone – one may drop a plumb line into the depth of the soul so that all the most banal externalities of life finally are connected with the ultimate decisions concerning the meaning and style of life" ([1903] 1997, p. 177; [1903] 1995, p. 120; translation modified). The image of the plumb line, or lead sounding (*Senkblei* in German) – a device used to measure vertical distances, often between surfaces and depths – suggests a way of depicting the connection between the outward appearances of metropolitan life and the inner cultural dynamics and workings of the individual city-dweller. He describes the emergence of big cities as the latest and perhaps greatest manifestation of the power of the human intellect, both to control and to enhance every aspect of life, often with potentially disastrous or even hilarious consequences for the life of the individual. Insofar as he invokes the figure of the plumb line in strategic places in other writings as well, he offers a clue to the literary quality of his philosophical, sociological, and aesthetic writings as a whole (see, for example, his summary of the *Philosophy of Money* and the preface to his monograph *Rembrandt*; [1900/1907] 1989, p. 719; [1916] 2005, p. 3).

Generally speaking, Simmel's approach to modern experience does not just alternate between comical and tragic modes of storytelling. His way of deploying what I call 'theory-fictions' is also part of a larger strategy that is as much methodical as it is metaphorical (Beer, 2016, p. 411-2). Where other thinkers of his day viewed symbolic imagery suspiciously as merely ornamental, or dismissed the use of literary language in scholarly writing as unscientific, Simmel freely employs analogies and other tropes as a way of bringing concepts to life and of expressing ideas more vividly. His former student, Siegfried Kracauer, draws a useful distinction between how Simmel examines "relations of essential congruence or belonging together" in a strictly conceptual and literal way, on the one hand, and his free use of analogies to depict "relations of affinity and similarity between things", on the other (Kracauer [1920] 1995, p. 251). In other words, Simmel's analogies are not simply "witticizing deviations from the goal of the particular investigation [insofar as] they are to a large extent themselves this goal" (Kracauer, [1920] 1995, p. 257). His use of figurative language is thus not a decorative flourish, but rather a technique for identifying nodal points and passageways into the expansive complexes and elusive connections that constitute

reality. Like lights illuminating hidden caverns (to invoke a kind of meta-analogy), Simmel's use of images, metaphors, and analogies show how "the entirety of his thought is basically only a grasping of objects by looking at them", and thus a way of grounding abstract concepts in perceptual experience (Kracauer [1920] 1995, p. 257).

As other commentators have pointed out (Green, 1988; Goodstein, 2002; Tokarzewska, 2010; Blumenberg, 2012; Simons, 2019), Simmel engages in various strategies of writing and adopts a wide range of literary styles and poetic forms that are often unique to him. In contrast to other classic thinkers, he self-consciously, explicitly, and extensively expresses ideas through rhetorical figures, visual sketches, and metaphorical images. Many of these are presented in passing references – to plumb lines and vending machines, for instance – or in elaborate discussions of material objects – including bridges, doors, and handles – which then serve as 'thinking pictures' or theoretical fictions for advancing more expansive arguments (Swedberg, 2016; Kemple, 2018b). Here, I want to emphasize how Simmel's distinctive use of a variety of rhetorical strategies is integral to his unique theoretical perspective on life in general and on social or individual life in particular. The play between ideas and images in his writing unfolds through a combination of systematic thought and improvised expression, often by drawing on a full repertoire of 'master tropes' (Burke, 1989). For instance, in the *Philosophy of Money* he employs a method of "finding in each of life's details the totality of its meaning" ([1900/1907] 2004, p. 52) in an attempt to see the whole in the part and to perceive the particular in the general (the trope of synecdoche); in "The Metropolis and Mental Life", as already noted, and even more extensively in *Sociology*, he shows how fragments of human experience are associated, transformed, or reduced to one another in forming a temporal series, a relationship of cause and effect, or a special link between the outer surfaces and inner depths of social life (the trope of metonymy); and in later writings on the metaphysics of modern culture he is concerned with expressing how appearances may hide the truth, how representations can distort reality, or how illusions often provide indirect pathways to the actuality of lived experience (the trope of irony). As I show in the case of his treatment of Goethe in what follows, Simmel is less concerned with treating fiction as an object of theoretical analysis than he is with deploying theory-fictions that both represent and enact social truths. Reading Goethe's scientific and philosophical writings on nature along with his plays, novels, and poems, Simmel does not focus on whether they are faithful representations, illuminating exaggerations, or fantastic constructions of reality. Rather, he is concerned with how they express the poetics, theatrics, and narrative qualities of intellectual and cultural life (*Geistesleben*). I argue further that Simmel's way of writing theory also exemplifies a hybrid genre that expresses the fictional dimensions of experience while at the same time enacting the tragic-comic features of theory itself.

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The Tragedy of Faust's Fate

The supreme model for Simmel's approach to the life of mind seems to have been the plays, poetry, and novels, as well as the scientific treatises and autobiographical writings of his literary idol and intellectual ideal, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). Simmel devoted an underappreciated monograph to Goethe ([1913] 2003), whose work absorbed him throughout his career (at least a dozen were published before his monograph and more than a half dozen more after). In a certain sense, Goethe's work seems to inform Simmel's own way of breaking scholarly conventions and bridging literary genres. Goethe's exemplary life as a lover, intellectual, novelist, playwright, poet, and politician somehow embodies for Simmel a model for how a certain ideal of individuality may be realized in spite of the fragmentary character of modernity, if only in the aesthetic realm and the life of the mind (*Geistesleben*). The title character of Goethe's great drama *Faust*, who sells his soul to the devil for more knowledge, pleasure, wealth, and power, for example, might be understood to epitomize the metaphysical and modern search for what Simmel will later call 'more-life'. In his quest for new experiences beyond the dusty world of his study, Faust learns to understand his love for the doomed Gretchen as his first great adventure, and the episode of her tragic demise will ultimately establish him as the hero in the dramatic epic of his own life. Simmel offers a characterization of Goethe that could apply to Faust, if not also to Simmel himself and to the values of masculine individuality more generally: "he was unfaithful to women because he was faithful to himself, because he obeyed the higher law of his own life above all others" ([1913] 2003, p. 211; Kemple, 2018b, p. 93, 154, 178). As the Chorus Mysticus sings in the concluding lines of Goethe's play, which Simmel comments on in passing in the context of a philosophical meditation on love (1984, p. 177), Faust's lover lives on in the memory, not as a real person in her own right, but only as the metaphysical sublimation of her immortal nature as Everywoman, and as a fictional figure for the potential redemption of the tragic character of all life more generally:

<i>Alles Vergängliche</i>	All that is changeable
<i>Ist nur ein Gleichnis;</i>	Is but refraction;
<i>Das Unzulängliche,</i>	The unattainable
<i>Hier wird's Ereignis;</i>	Here becomes action.
<i>Das Unbeschreibliche,</i>	Human discernment
<i>Hier ist's getan;</i>	Here is passed by;
<i>Das Ewig-Weibliche</i>	Woman Eternal
<i>Zieht uns hinan.</i>	Draw us on high.

(Goethe [1832] 1986, p. 214; [1832] 1976, p. 308)

For Goethe as for Simmel, the meaning of life is ultimately changeable (*vergänglich*), unattainable (*unzulänglich*), or indescribable (*unbeschreiblich*). Life becomes real only as an

action accomplished (*getan*) or an event completed (*Ereignis*), if only through the detour of a refraction, reflection, or analogy (*Gleichnis*). In this perspective, thoughts, poetic images, and symbols are themselves ultimately ruled by a mysterious seductive feminine principle (*das Ewig-Weibliche*) that might someday transform restless, formless, and transient life and redeem life's fluctuations into something stable, expressible, and eternal ([1914] 2004, p. 38). Just as Faust's epic personal journey leads from the misery of his study to the bliss of sensual love before ascending to some ultimate scene of salvation, so too are Simmel's reflections on the tragedy of culture implicitly resolved in the fleeting shape of an analogy (*Gleichnis*) with art and literature, or at least in the philosophical life of a singular individual thinking and acting alone.

Goethe and Simmel each approach human life as a great epic tragedy which is only fulfilled by confronting conditions of cultural fragmentation and social alienation, and which realizes its inner potential only by damaging and destroying itself. The fictional life of Faust is animated by his acknowledgment that his unrealized energies would be his undoing if he were to remain a scholar in his study: "The pact with Mephisto and the completion of his life's work with the help of demonic powers is merely the positive rendition of this fate" ([1916] 2007, p. 187). In Simmel's view, as in Goethe's, the hope for overcoming the tragedy of modernity and transcending the fateful worldview of the fragmented modern individual lies in the redemptive potential of 'female culture'. In contrast to the exalted feminine figures of Goethe's creative imagination, however, the final essay of Simmel's collection *Philosophical Culture* offers a more pragmatic yet still speculative resolution. Here, he expresses his admiration for the achievements of the modern feminist movement in expanding women's personal participation in the production and consumption of cultural goods. Despite these advances, he argues, this movement has yet to result in the creation of new cultural values, social forms, intellectual capacities, and aesthetic sensibilities. What he calls 'the cultural capital [*Kulturbesitz*]' of the modern era – the combination of objective forces and subjective ideals, of material progress and intellectual refinement – continues to be defined and controlled by men in ways that pose a threat to the development of an autonomous female culture ([1911] 1984, p. 64). He wonders if there is a fundamental discrepancy between female nature and objective culture as such, and imagines whether an objectively 'female culture' may essentially be a contradiction in terms ([1911] 1984, p. 100). The impasse he encounters in these reflections on women and sexuality may well lie in the narrowly hetero or binary schema he assumes in addressing these issues, and in how he resorts to a theoretical fiction of womanhood rather than attending to the lived realities of the women around him (see Kemple 2018b, p. 176-77). As he once remarked in conversation to his student Georg Lukács, "there are too few categories, just as there are too few sexes" (Lukács [1918] 1991, p. 147). In the end, only fictional and metaphysical worlds seem to offer him a

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glimpse of social salvation, or of the unity-in-diversity that lies beyond this historical and cultural dilemma.

Simmel's writings often appear fragmentary and essayistic even as they strive to find coherence in a comprehensive idea of Life that he encountered in Goethe. For this reason, the theoretical life he himself lived might be considered tragic insofar as his writings cannot fully realize his ambitious intentions, and also in the sense that they only reach their fullest expression when they break through the boundaries of their generic form. And yet this failure may indicate less a personal shortcoming on his part than an inherent feature of modern culture itself, if not also in the rhetorical and scholarly resources at his disposal. As his own career demonstrates, the tragedy of individuality is evident in the life of the intellectual just as it also finds expression in other cultural spheres of modernity, such as painting, theater, and literature. In the essay "The Dramatic Actor and Reality", for instance, he acknowledges the "deep social tragedy" that lies at the heart of contemporary art. As if to reflect on his own experience as a scholar, he notes how the masses have more access than ever to cultural institutions, and yet "an abyss without bridges cuts off the majority from insight into the essence of art forms" ([1912] 1968, p. 91). Like the theorist who does not just represent social reality but also renders it in intellectual and written form, "the actor does not transform the dramatic work of art into reality [but] on the contrary, [...] makes use of reality, and transforms the reality which has been assigned to him into a work of art" ([1912] 1968, p. 93). Like the intellectual who struggles to understand and live a reality he cannot fully control, the dramatic actor is neither the puppet of the director nor simply a person interacting directly with the audience; in a sense, each both enacts and creates "a complete unity with its own laws" ([1912] 1968, p. 96).

Whether or not we agree with Simmel that acting is essentially a feminine art, as he suggests in the essay "Female Culture" ([1911] 1984, p. 85–90), we might share his enthusiasm for the great actresses of his day who impressed him with their ability to perform according to their own "individual law". As he marvels in a short piece published in the avant-garde journal *Jugend*, even on a bad night when she was obviously "tired and indisposed", La Duse – as the celebrated Italian actress Eleonora Duse (1858–1924) was called – was able to display the unity of her inner life and her public image, of body and soul, through the beauty of her movements ([1897–1902] 2012, p. 276–7). As if to complete the analogy between the intellectual and the actor, Simmel notes that the lesson he has learned from theater in general and from La Duse in particular is that every instant and every action realizes something of the life of the whole. As he remarks in the conclusion of his essay on acting, "the task which confronts the present age [is] to replace mechanism with life processes", and yet accomplishing this task may only be within reach of a few with access to the arts and sciences ([1912] 1968, p. 96).

Simmel himself seems to take on the quasi-fictional role of the Faustian storyteller and dramatic actor in a series of pieces he published under a variety of pseudonyms in the journal *Jugend* (including the one on La Duse), to which he gave the collective title "Momentbilder *sub specie aeternitatis*" (Snapshots Under the Aspect of Eternity). This avant-garde journal featured unconventional work by fiction writers, graphic artists, musicians, and other adventurous cultural workers associated with the *art nouveau* or *Jugendstil* movement, which hoped to transform the modern world into a "total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*)" (Rammstedt, 1991). For Simmel, this periodical offered a forum for his own creative ambitions by allowing him to express his most idiosyncratic or untested ideas in anecdotes, aphorisms, fairy tales, poems, and short stories, often in ways that would not be acceptable in a conventional philosophical monograph or scholarly essay. The fanciful anecdote titled "Relativity" published in 1902 (three years before Albert Einstein's first paper on the general theory of relativity), begins with a citation from *Elective Affinities*, Goethe's mature novel about a complex love quartet that forms when two young people suddenly enter into the lives of an older couple: "Fate occasionally fulfills our desires, but only in its own way" ([1897–1902] 2007, p. 275). Without naming either himself or Goethe, Simmel makes a very personal point in an entertaining and pithy way about the tragedy of intelligent people who are ultimately forced by fate to acknowledge their own ignorance.

An anonymous narrator recounts a story he once overheard about a man who asks the devil to agree to make him the most intelligent man in the world. As is typical in stories about pacts with the devil, including Goethe's *Faust*, the man does not quite get what he thought he had bargained for. The day after his request is granted, he finds that his servants are now incompetent and have turned the household upside down; his son has been punished at school for having understood nothing; and even his wife, with whom he always shared everything, can no longer follow his usual report on his workday: "Now the man was no more able to understand those close to him than he could with those who were distant" ([1897–1902] 2007, p. 276). He then realizes that the devil had indeed kept his word, not by making him more intelligent but rather by making everyone else more stupid! From this realization, another man listening to this tale draws the conclusion that stupidity and intelligence are relative. What's more, the listener adds, people who are against public schooling or the enlightenment of the masses are really only trying to ensure that they remain more intelligent than everyone else, although in fact they are simply paying homage to the principle of intelligence. As Simmel's readers might well be wondering as they reach the end of this curious story, if the fate of each of us is relative, and if fate does not always fulfill our desires as we had hoped or intended, then perhaps knowing our fate with absolute certainty in advance may be among the stupidest things we could wish for.

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The Comedy of a Goethean Life

As this anecdote suggests, even the loftiest moral ideals, philosophical questions, and sociological conundrums are occasionally posed by Simmel in the mixed mode of tragi-comedy. For the most part, however, his metaphysics of life is speculatively formulated as an ethical philosophy of human existence rather than dramatically framed as a theory-fiction. Simply put, he argues that our lived experiences are both shaped by and a product of our circumstances, and yet our sense of self relentlessly drives us to reach beyond any particular place and time. Thus, each one of us is constantly engaged in an inner dialogue between the person I am and the person I strive to be, just as we are all constantly comparing the world we know and live in with the world as we imagine it will or should become. As Goethe writes in *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, specifically the chapter titled "Reflections on the Spirit of Wanderers", our relationships with ourselves and with others require us to act on "what the day demands" (Goethe [1829] 1989, p. 294). Max Weber, who also cites this maxim in "Science as a Vocation", goes on to express this idea in figural terms by stressing that each one of us must find and obey "the demon that holds the threads of one's life" (Weber [1917/1919] 2004, p. 31). In referring to this aphorism in *The View of Life* ([1918] 2010, p. 109), Simmel emphasizes the simultaneously moral and metaphysical view that the task of every person is to discover and enact the individual law that springs from the very sources of one's life: "the law of the individual – developing from the same root from which the individual's (perhaps utterly diverging) reality springs – [...] is nothing other than the totality or centrality of life itself, unfolding as obligation" ([1918] 2010, p. 126). In other words, the life that pulses through everyone is concentrated in each action in such a way that what is experienced as a matter of life and death may also become a singular and everyday duty: "life, proceeding in its totality as Ought, means law for the very same life that proceeds in its totality as actuality" ([1918] 2010, p. 107).

Rather than formulating some abstract moral rule that could then be applied to each individual equally – such as Kant's categorical imperative to act according to a maxim that a person could will that maxim to be a universal law – Simmel imagines how a law "that is particular to each individual [...] applies universally to all the individual's activities" (Lee and Silver 2012, p. 125). With this idea in mind, he tries to think beyond the conventional wisdom expressed in traditional philosophical axioms and biblical commandments, as well as in the modern political slogan that all people are created equal or romantic ideas about how each individual is unique. Rather, he considers various ways of conveying how the individual law prescribes a distinctive form of individualism that emerges from the flux of historical life but is not simply subject to the rules and regularities of the state, the market, civil society, or nature. Simmel's final reflections on this

theme in *The View of Life* reveal a thinker engaged in the search for a general philosophy of life, but also for the concept of 'a life', that is, a way of expressing how a singular being that strives to transcend boundaries is also immanent in the process of becoming (Deleuze, 1997). Instead of resorting to ancient scholarly doctrines about what exists beyond the plane of the physical world or embracing popular beliefs about the mystical basis of reality, he strives to imagine how a *life* develops and effervesces into more-life, ultimately by augmenting and overcoming itself in the process of becoming more-than-life. This complex idea brings him to the limits of theoretical discourse and its capacity to express truth.

Despite the mind-expanding breadth of his *View of Life* and the profoundly new directions of thought and imagination this book seems to point to, Simmel's essay "Kant and Goethe: On the History of the Modern *Weltanschauung*" might stand just as well as his final 'testament'. Here Simmel situates his own thought between two cultural heroes who guided his whole intellectual life – initially Kant, but ultimately Goethe. This piece marks a valiant attempt on his part to address the modern conflict between mechanism and vitalism in the 'comic' mode I invoked at the outset, that is, as a way of expressing how life 'is or becomes the Absolute' by embodying the universal through each and every particular act, and how outward necessity is experienced by the individual as inward chance. Simmel does not try to choose between these two iconic thinkers of the modern worldview, as if their respective approaches to conflicting value-ideals could be reconciled with one another, or as if one could be understood to have superseded the other. Rather, he concludes that each represents the contradiction between mechanism and vitalism, and that this contradiction is irresolvable and yet essential to the modern worldview. Since the Renaissance, human beings have come to see themselves as fundamentally dualistic beings and the world itself as divided between nature and mind, often by placing scientific objectivity in opposition to the inner meaning of life ([1916] 2007, p. 159). Kant and Goethe each place themselves beyond the opposition between materialism and spiritualism, and take up a position somewhere between sensualism and rationalism, ultimately by reflecting on how knowledge and experience are grounded in the unity of body, mind, and soul ([1916] 2007, p. 167, 175). In Simmel's view, this unity is not necessarily harmonious but rather betrays a more fundamental antagonism and irreconcilable tension between the flux or flow of *life* and whatever *form* can emerge from or be imposed on this process. Simmel's history of the modern worldview does not just look backwards to Kant and Goethe, but also beyond them in imagining how the differences between them betray a fundamental tension within contemporary existence itself.

Simmel's most popular book *Kant*, a collection of his university lectures, was published in four editions with significant additions and revisions up to the year he died. In the preface he states that his aim is not just to conduct an academic exercise, but also to convey

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how Kant's philosophy expresses a certain image of the world ([1904–1918] 1997, p. 7). In "Kant and Goethe", this expansive approach to the life of the mind or spirit (*Geist*) is developed as a full-fledged theory-fiction of the modern worldview. In a way that is mostly only hinted at elsewhere in his work, here he defines this worldview as an open-ended perspective on unity-in-diversity and as a distinctive way of looking at the relatively autonomous cultural spheres of modern life. Kant addresses this dilemma by raising the subjectivism of the modern age to a total principle and a comprehensive worldview. In the end, Kant upholds the prevailing scientific interpretation of reality as consisting of mechanical laws and spatial relationships. As Simmel summarizes this position, "neither materialism, which aims to explain the mind through the body, nor spiritualism, which explains the body through the mind, are admissible; each has to be explained in terms of laws applicable only to itself" ([1916] 2007, p. 162). For Kant, the absolute limit of knowledge is nature, and so non-human and objective 'things-in-themselves' can only be represented through the separate faculties of the free and creative mind. In Simmel's view, however, such a speculative and imaginative perspective offers a necessary but only partial perspective on the world.

In repeatedly returning to Kant's critical philosophy, Simmel eventually became more critical of this intellectualist interpretation of existence even as he developed a deeper appreciation for Kant's emphasis on the *activity* of representation by the *whole* person, not just within the mind of the philosopher ([1904–1918] 1997, p. 61, 86). Nevertheless, he became increasingly dissatisfied with Kant's reticence in discussing sensuous or lived experience (*Erlebnis*), the social conditions of religious faith, the everyday ethics of altruism and lying, or the world of art. In a letter to his friend Count Keyserling he asks: "When will the genius appear who will emancipate us from the spell of the subject in the same way that Kant liberated us from that of the object? And what will this third category be?" (2008a, p. 66–7). Simmel eventually found an answer to this question in the radical ideas about *life* and experience in the recent writings of Bergson and Husserl. As he argues in a short essay, "On Some Problems of Contemporary Philosophy", these thinkers formulate this 'third category' in terms of "the physical-metaphysical fundamental emergence of the world process that reaches both upwards with the human spirit and downwards toward mechanical materiality" ([1912] 2001, p. 383–4; forthcoming). Goethe's writings in the 19th century already prefigure this philosophical conception in terms of the notion of *Leben* (Life), and his critical remarks on Kant may have served as an inspiration for Simmel's own life-philosophy: "All my life, whether in poetry or research, I had alternated between a synthetic approach and an analytic one – to me these were the systole and the diastole of the human mind, like a second breathing, never separated, always pulsing" (Goethe [1817] 1988, p. 29). For Simmel as for Goethe, this process of 'inhaling and exhaling' the modern spirit entails experimenting

with scientific, philosophical, and artistic ways of thinking about and experiencing the world.

In his attempt to render this approach to the problem of Life as vividly as possible, Simmel's 1913 monograph *Goethe* sets out on a vitalist quest for what he calls "the archetype" or "primary phenomenon (*Urphänomen*)" and "the idea' of Goethe" ([1913] 2003, p. 9–10). Rather than writing a biography of the man or a critical appreciation of his work, he aims to explore a third perspective or middle path between these alternatives. Since Goethe does not have a well-developed philosophy, there can only be a kind of philosophizing *about* Goethe on the basis of his literary, scientific, and autobiographical writings. As Simmel argues later in "Kant and Goethe", Goethe offers a glimpse of a comprehensive life-philosophy and a holistic approach to experience in both his scientific researches and his poetic writings. In the poem *Allerdings: Zum Physike* (All Things Considered: To the Physicist), for instance, which Simmel quotes from to illustrate this point (Simmel [1916] 2007, p. 165), Goethe expresses a worldview that unites nature and spirit by comprehending object and subject *within* rather than against the realm of appearances:

<i>Natur hat weder Kern</i>	Nature has neither core
<i>Noch Schale,</i>	Nor outer rind
<i>Alles ist sie mit einem Male.</i>	It is all at the same time.
	Goethe ([1820] 1983, p. 236–7)

Just as nature "has neither core nor outer rind", the inner and external states of the life of the individual are simply "alternating pulse beats" of the all-encompassing spiritual life of Nature. Invoking Goethe's image of a body rhythmically breathing in and out, Simmel imagines how "the principle of *Leben*, which is apparent in nature, also applies to the human soul", and how knowledge of the world is a kind of pulsating natural function of life itself ([1916] 2007, p. 166; [1913] 2003, p. 94). The unity or 'primal phenomenon' (*Urphänomen*) of this living multiplicity and reciprocity (*Wechselwirksamkeit*) may be discovered through scientific experiments, observations, and concepts, just as it can be expressed in poetic images, literary figures, or analogical reasoning (Dodd 2008, p. 412, 432).

In a posthumously published general introduction to a new edition of Goethe's collected works, Simmel elaborates on what he calls "the values of Goethean Life". He describes the relationship between Goethe's inner subjective passions and the outer expression those passions take in both literary and scientific endeavors. In particular, Simmel notes how one feels the life of the narrator more palpably in Goethe's novels than in the plays, with their alternation between naturalism and stylization, and how these prose fictions often combine scientific realism with literary virtuosity: "The narrative tone, which does not slip away in the general structure while still being presented objectively, corresponds precisely to that autobiographical aspect of the later

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scientific reports: the simultaneous preservation and overcoming of the distance between subject and object that can only be understood as coming from the vital character of his creation" ([1914] 2004, p. 70). Above all, Goethe's quasi-autobiographical novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Journeyman Years*, marks a decisive breakthrough toward the romantic expression of individuality, with its understanding of a "constitutive particularity and singularity" that cannot be exchanged for anyone or anything else ([1913] 2003, p. 160). Here Goethe's distinctive narrative voice orchestrates the cacophony of speeches, maxims, letters, diaries, songs, poems, short stories, fables, fairytales, and novellas recited by the vast array of characters that populate this novel. As one of Wilhelm's interlocutors pronounces at one point in the novel, the truth does not lie in the middle of contradictory opinions; rather "the problem lies in the middle, unfathomable perhaps, also accessible, if you give it a try" (Goethe [1929] 1989, p. 280). In an analogous way, Simmel's distinctive style of writing theory is figured in the often contingent or apparently arbitrary ways in which he articulates how a true view of life can be found between a wide variety of apparently unfathomable alternatives.

Another of Simmel's experimental "Snapshots under the Aspect of Eternity" (*Momentbilder sub specie aeternitatis*) like the one on 'Relativity' discussed above, offers a humorous glimpse into what it might mean to live a "Goethean life". "The Maker of Lies" is also a kind of Goethean fable of truth-telling and illusion-making that obliquely considers an apparently irresolvable conundrum – can we ever truly deceive ourselves? ([1987–1902] 2012, p. 409–10). A narrator recounts the fantastic story of a magician who gives a man the power to make others lie. With the zeal of a torturer, the man compels people to say things they know are not true, until one day he falls in love with a woman who is indifferent to him. He then uses his power to force her to declare her love for him, but soon realizes that he cannot make her truly love him. Finally, he turns his power to produce falsehoods on himself, hoping to deceive himself into thinking that he and the woman will love each other and live happily ever after. And indeed, the narrator tells us, "everything was as good as it could be – or almost so" ([1987–1902] 2012, p. 410). Without directly explaining what this might mean, the story ends with the man puzzling over the magician's "good intentions", leaving us to surmise that perhaps he suspects the magician had maliciously lied to him after all. In pondering Simmel's story (which, we should recall, he did not sign with his own name!), we might reflect on the precarious relationship of trust and deception, of poetry and truth (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*, as Goethe titled his autobiography) that characterizes a *writer* on the one hand, who may be holding something back for later or leaving something in reserve for others to make use of as they please, and a *reader* on the other hand, who may be misled or manipulated by such omissions or deceptive ploys, perhaps unconsciously or even willingly (see Olli Pyyhtinen's essay in this issue). In his own way, Simmel seems to be raising a

question about whether our capacity for keeping parts of ourselves clandestine, while at the same time affecting or influencing those around us, is a matter of bad faith or an essential feature of the human condition.

Conclusion: Values of a Simmelian Existence

Simmel himself suggests that his extensive study of Goethe might stand as a kind of 'confession' of his own innermost beliefs and values ([1913] 2003, p. 10). The proper name 'Goethe' designates for him, not just as an intellectual model or an ideal life, but also the figure for an overall attitude to the world and an exemplary set of personal commitments. In effect, his comparisons between Goethe and Kant, and between Goethe and himself, may serve as an analogy for how he wished to view the relationship between his own life and work, and thus as an approximate expression of the relationship between the "spiritual meaning [*geistige Sinn*]" of his particular way of being in the world and the "rhythm and importance [*Rhythmik und Beteutsamkeit*]" of his life as a whole. In "Kant and Goethe", he recalls that in the 1870s (when he was a young man growing up in Berlin), the science-oriented solution to the problem of life found inspiration in the catchphrase "Back to Kant!", which quickly prompted a reply in the realm of aesthetics: "Back to Goethe!" ([1916] 2007, p. 163–4). In the essay's dramatic final paragraph, he considers whether the worldview of the epoch that is now coming to an end might instead be expressed in the slogan: "Kant or Goethe!" ([1916] 2007, p. 190). Against this view, he concludes that in the coming age these two intellectual camps might be united "under the sign of Kant and Goethe". In other words, the future worldview may not entail mediating between these conflicting perspectives or reconciling their differences, but rather "negating them through the fact of the lived experience of them" ([1916] 2007, p. 190). Simmel certainly hoped that his own writings might serve to illuminate a future path and third way beyond the standoff between the scientific-mechanistic worldview associated with Kant and the aesthetic-vitalistic worldview embodied in Goethe (Levine, 2012). Along the same lines, perhaps today we might formulate a new motto for the social sciences and humanities that would point beyond these conflicting perspectives, and gesture toward the common ground between them: "Back to Simmel!"

In our own time, there has been a growing awareness of the need to return to Simmel, as if we are rediscovering in him our own preoccupations, or somehow meeting him again on a bridge across time as he returns from a point we are still struggling to reach (Pyyhtinen, 2018, p. 4). Shortly after his death, one of his most influential students, Georg Lukács, called Simmel "the most significant and important transitional figure in the whole of modern philosophy", characterizing his teacher as a playful

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thinker whose ideas “must remain a labyrinth and cannot become a system” (Lukács [1918] 1991, p. 145, 148). Against the grain of this influential viewpoint, I imagine Simmel instead much as he pictured Goethe – as a methodical yet playful thinker who speaks to our deepest concerns and who calls out to us across the abysses of place and time. In a poem Simmel wrote in 1901 he expresses a similar sentiment in a more intimate, melancholic, and cryptic way:

*Es war ein Abgrund zwischen allem Sein und Dir,
So brückenlos, – wie Ja und Nein es von einander sind,
Dass Sehnsucht selbst nicht weiss, wohin die Arme strecken.
Und wie Du mich erblicktest, der ich traurig ging
Und liebend – und Dich ein Erröthen überkam,
Der warmen Welle, die Dir auf zum Herzen stieg,
Abglanz und Scham – ich wusst' es, ach, so gut und tief:
Es war doch nur, dass plötzlich Dich die Hoffnung regte,
Ich sei vielleicht die Brücke – nur die Brücke.*

There was an abyss between all existence and You,
So bridgeless – just as Yes and No are from one another,
That longing itself does not know what the arms reach out for.
And as You glanced at me, I who walked sadly by
And loving – and the blush that came over You,
A reflection and embarrassment from the warm wave
That rose up in your heart – alas, I knew it quite well and deeply:

It was just a hope that suddenly stirred You,
Perhaps I might be the bridge – only the bridge.

(Simmel [1897-1902] 2012, p. 269, 271)

A century after his death we may still find in Simmel a bridge between poetry and truth, a middle way between fact and fiction, if not also a path beyond the fates and follies of tragedy and comedy and to many of the questions we have almost forgotten how to ask.

Our task may therefore lie less in understanding what messages he still has for us today than in ‘thinking with Simmel’ as a way of articulating our own concerns (Kemple and Pyyhtinen 2016). In other words, we might say that ‘Simmel’ is not just the proper name of a classic thinker, but also a term for making sense of the modern world in the figural language of ‘simmeles’, metaphors, and analogies; an adjective for describing how people and things are different from as well as ‘simmelar’ to one another; and a verb that designates how we ‘simmelate’ realities in any number of unfathomable ways. Simmel himself seems to have been thinking along these lines in the lectures on pedagogy that he delivered during the war to a small group of students at a makeshift seminar held in the botanical gardens of the University of Strasbourg. With typical modesty, he states bluntly that the educator’s goal is to become as superfluous as the contents of instruction: “in

this sense, instruction should be education and should educate young people to continue on their own through self-education” ([1915–16] 2004, p. 342). In promoting this ideal of individual autonomy, he envisions how teaching and learning, reading and writing may provide an experimental setting for overcoming the crisis of modernity by creatively engaging the whole person in an education for and as life (Levine, 1992; Vernik, 2008).

Simmel’s tragic interpretation of modernity implies an underlying narrative that begins with an original worldly plenitude and leads to the dissolution of this world into fragments. His vision does not stop there, however, but also pictures the possible emergence of a new unity-in-diversity, if only in the life of the mind and the world of art. For this reason, it is misleading to characterize Simmel himself as a tragic figure or as a philosopher of tragedy, since he also anticipates bridging, overcoming or even embracing the gulf between subjective and objective culture rather than capitulating to this broken state of affairs. He imagines rising above fate through everyday experience, and overcoming necessity by realizing its playful dimensions and internalizing them ‘comically’ as contingency. In “The Conflict in Modern Culture”, the magisterial lecture on the current crisis that he gave in the last year of his life, Simmel describes how the modern age seems to have demolished the bridge between past and future, leaving only formless life to fill the gap. He highlights a few of the latest attempts to ‘create new forms appropriate to present energies’ by forging cultural links across the abyss and ruins of modern life, including expressionist painting and music; the philosophy of pragmatism; the liberal ethics of prostitution and open marriages; and the appeal of mysticism and spiritualism ([1918] 1997, p. 80–90). His own theoretical and creative writings may also be treated as symptoms and diagnoses of this conflict in modern culture, and as tragi-comic expressions of a desire to test the limits of the absolute by bringing thought itself to the brink of tears and the limits of laughter.

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