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## Ambiguous Individuality: Georg Simmel on the “Who” and the “What” of the Individual

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**Abstract** The essay discusses the philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel’s theorizing about the individual. Whereas it is typically within the context of the modern metropolis and the mature money economy that Simmel’s ideas have been discussed in the secondary literature, I render those ideas in another light by addressing the ontological and existential issues crucial to his conception of the individual. In Simmel, the individual is divided between the “what” and the “who,” between the qualities which make one *something* individual and one’s non-repeatable and finite existence which makes one *someone* singular. I argue that whereas the first dimension can be understood sociologically, in terms of social relations, the latter is not accessible to sociology as such, but must be treated philosophically. Therefore, if we wish to address this duality that lies at the heart of individuality, a “philosophical turn” for sociology is called for.

**Keywords** Individuality · Philosophy · Singularity · Simmel · Sociology · Type

### Introduction

In a television interview, Jacques Derrida is confronted to tell “[w]hatever you want to say about love.”<sup>1</sup> Being aware that the audience is expecting the famous philosopher to say something deeply profound, he finds himself backed into a corner: “About what? Love [*l’amour*] or death [*la mort*]?” “Love,” the interviewer replies, “We’ve heard enough about death.” “I have nothing to say about love,”

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<sup>1</sup> The excerpt of the interview I am referring to can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dj1BuNmhjAY>.

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Derrida says dumbfounded, “At least pose a question. I can’t examine ‘love’ like that.” Then, after searching for a while for something solid to which to cling on, he finally manages to rescue himself by coming up with an idea: “One of the questions one could pose... I’m just searching a bit... is the question of the difference between the who and the what. Is love the love of someone or the love of some thing.” That is, “Do I love someone for the absolute singularity of who they are? I love you because you are you. Or do I love your qualities, your beauty, your intelligence?”

Derrida draws the succinct conclusion: “The difference between the who and the what at the heart of love, separates the heart.” This interpretation of love is, evidently, organized around the idea of *individuality*. By drawing from the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918), one could also say that it is thereby a characteristically *modern* interpretation of love. In the essay “Der Platonischer und der Moderne Eros” (2004a; translated by Donald N. Levine as “Eros, Platonic and Modern”, see Simmel 1971a), Simmel proposes that for us moderns, individuality stands as the focal point of love (p. 187). He highlights the distinctiveness of the modern conception of love by contrasting it to Plato. Plato characterizes love as a “daemon” that connects us to the *supraindividual*, because he sees it as being attached to the universal idea of Beauty equivalent in all of its manifestations. For us, by contrast, love concerns precisely the individual, a “unique, irreplaceable being” (pp. 183–184; trans. 1971a, p. 241). It pertains to the individual existence and qualities of the one we love, and not any universal beauty to be found in each and everyone.

Thus, Derrida’s account of love—not knowingly—reveals also the heart of individuality, a heart which is not a “heart” at all, but rather a decentering, a split, a divide. Individuality, as much as our love for the other, is always divided between the *who* and the *what*: on the one hand, each individual is an absolute singularity, someone incomparable and irreplaceable, and yet, on the other hand, composed of some-thing that one is, of qualities possessed by many people, the combination of which nevertheless succeeds in making one unique. Interestingly, it was precisely in accordance with this duality that the individual also was conceptualized by Simmel, whom Michael Landmann (1976) has called “the philosopher of *individuality*” (p. 7). While Landmann’s claim that the problem of the individual were the focal point of Simmel’s work in which the different threads of his multifaceted oeuvre conjoined is a slight exaggeration—since Simmel considered the problem of individuality merely as “a partial expression of a much deeper undertaking” in his work (Simmel 2005a, p. 872)—I nevertheless think that Simmel can be appreciated as the foremost classical theorist of individuality. He developed the most refined sense for conceptual distinctions about the notion of the individual in social theory (see Honneth 2004, pp. 464–465 for a similar view). Hence I contend that we can expand our understanding of the nature of individuality substantially by examining Simmel’s theorizing. That is the basic motif and *raison d’être* of this essay.

The examination will be laid out as follows. First I will discuss the manner in which Simmel sets out a dialogue between the what and the who of the individual by explicating his duplex notion of individuality. That dialogical relation is expanded on in the section after that by exploring Simmel’s treatment of individual

*freedom* and *uniqueness* as the social forms of individuality. What is particularly interesting in Simmel's notion is that he does not make a decision between the two forms but rather tries to connect them to one another while disclosing their contrast and retaining it in force. For Simmel, the decisive task of the views of life and society of his day was to create "a positive synthesis" between these forms (1995a, p. 56).

Simmel's reflections on individuality have been well documented in the secondary literature (see e.g. Landmann 1976, pp. 7–8; Mahlmann 1983; Dahme and Rammstedt 1986, pp. 18–19; Levine 1991; Nedelmann 1991; Lichtblau 1997, pp. 83–98; Schroer 2001, pp. 311–319; Honneth 2004, pp. 465–466). However, they have been treated mainly sociologically and under the aspect of the modern metropolis, instead of seeking their philosophical basis. This is all the more surprising considering that ontological and existential issues were crucial to Simmel's notion of individuality. As a "boundary concept" between sociology and philosophy, the individual draws attention to the complementarity of the two. This is addressed in the third section of the essay by connecting the two forms of individuality to Simmel's theorizing on "type." Their relation is crucial since, as Paola Giacomoni (1997) has suggested, the individual and type form a quintessential conceptual pair in Simmel's work. This discussion draws attention to the philosophical interpretation of qualitative individuality, which is specified in the next section of the essay as *singularity*. It presents itself as the third term of the individual to be found in Simmel's work, namely, as the mortality and non-repeatability of the individual's existence, which Simmel posits as the proper definition of the individual in his philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*). Unlike the social types of the individual, it is not accessible to sociology per se, but rather must be approached via philosophy: it can be understood only on the basis of "life" (*Leben*) fundamentally determined and limited by death. I will conclude the article by summing up how these different aspects of the individual relate to each other and what their implications are for sociological thought.

### Individuum Duplex

As regards the study of individuality, today Simmel is acknowledged above all for his studies of metropolitan social forms of individuality (see e.g. Levine 1991; Nedelmann 1991) and as the father of the sociological concept of "role" (see Gerhardt 1976). However, Simmel does not just embrace the view of "homo sociologicus" (cf. Dahrendorf 1969) and examine individuality exclusively as socio-historically constructed, but he insists that every human being has also an individual existence not shaped by social forces. Simmel subscribes to the view that humans have "ever had a dualistic nature," as he writes in the essay "Fashion" (1957, p. 541). That is, he commences from the ontological idea that there are two antagonistic forces at play in every human being: philosophically, they manifest themselves for instance in the part-whole tension; biologically, between heredity and variation; psychologically, between imitation and individual differentiation, and ideologically, between socialism and individualism. Lastly, from a sociological

point of view, we can perceive the contrast as the antagonism between the tendency towards uniformity and conformity to the demands of society, on the one hand, and a tendency towards individual differentiation and departure from the claims of society, on the other (Simmel 1957, pp. 542–543; 1995b, pp. 9–10). According to Simmel,

We have here the provincial forms, as it were, of those great antagonistic forces which represent the foundations of our individual destiny, and in which our outer as well as our inner life, our intellectual as well as our spiritual being, find the poles of their oscillations. (1957, p. 541)

When we look at the works of other classical authors the view held by Simmel turns out to be not that exceptional in sociology. It is rather a quite typical example of the model of *homo duplex* upon which a great deal of classical sociological theories are based.<sup>2</sup> Even Emile Durkheim who—because of his methodological maxim urging sociologists to explain the social only with the social—is most often considered as the sociological determinist *par excellence*, subscribed to the idea of “double-man” (Turner 1984, p. 20). For instance, in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1933 pp. 129–130), Durkheim writes:

There are in each of us, ... two consciences: one which is common to our group in its entirety, which, consequently, is not ourselves, but society living and acting within us; the other, on the contrary, represents that in us which is personal and distinct, that which makes us an individual.

From this Durkheim draws a conclusion which bears interesting comparison to Simmel’s thoughts. When Simmel holds in *Über social Differenzierung*, published originally in 1890, that “in every human being there is, *ceteris paribus*, as it were, an invariable proportion of the individual and the social which changes only in form” (1989b, p. 173), Durkheim states quite similarly that there are “two contrary forces” acting in us: the one *societal*—which he calls “centrifugal”—and the other *individual*—which he terms as “centripetal” (Durkheim 1933, p. 130). Again, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1973), Durkheim repeats basically the same thesis:

It is not without reason... that man feels himself to be double: he actually is double ... In brief, this duality corresponds to the double existence that we lead concurrently; the one purely individual and rooted in our organisms, the other social and nothing but an extension of society .... (p. 162)

Durkheim conceives of the individual and the social as being diametrically opposed to one another. He writes in *The Division of Labour* (1933) that we cannot at one and the same time adhere to both of the tendencies: if we desire to be individual, we cannot think and act as others do, and, if we express solidarity with others, our individuality decreases accordingly (p. 130). This is an important point since it immediately reveals the crucial difference between Simmel and Durkheim.

<sup>2</sup> Regina Mahlmann has scrutinized the Simmelian version of the model in her book *Homo Duplex. Die Zweifelt des Menschen bei Georg Simmel* (1983).

We get a firmer idea of that difference by turning back to Simmel's thoughts on fashion. Interestingly, in the essay, Simmel argues that even though as categories the individual and society are already in principle irreconcilable, fashion is nonetheless able to reconcile their antagonism in a provisory manner: "It is peculiarly characteristic of fashion that it renders possible a social obedience, which at the same time is a form of individual differentiation" (1957, pp. 548–549; 1995b, p. 19).

However, not only is fashion for Simmel a form in which the antagonistic forces of generalization and individuation compete and seek harmony, but so is the individual. For Simmel, the individual is ultimately a *synthesis concept* (Tennen in Böhlinger and Gründer 1976, p. 17; Schroer 2001, pp. 314–316). Whereas Durkheim regarded the two beings in humans, the individual and the social, as being separate, Simmel was critical of this kind of segmentation. As he writes in his "fragments," Simmel (2004b) holds that "a totality of inner life [*seelische Totalität*] always has the form of the individual" (p. 286). The individual is a totality which includes all contrasts. Of course thinking via dualisms and dichotomies is characteristic of Simmel's work: he notes in various of his writings that the basic motifs and determinations of our being and thinking order themselves typically into dualities such as being and becoming, the masculine and the feminine, absoluteness and relativity, emotion and reason, body and mind, passivity and activity, repose and motion, and so on (see e.g. 1992b, p. 197; 1995b, p. 9; 2003, p. 402). Each attribute receives its meaning only in relation to the other; Simmel perceives phenomena as the struggle, compromise, and combination of antagonistic forces, tendencies, or characteristics. Yet Simmel holds that the whole quarrel between the poles of these dichotomies loses its ground as soon as we look at how the dichotomous determinations "realize themselves in an individual." Drawing on the "pure meaning" of the concept of the in-dividual as "*indivisible*," he notes that the individual "must evidently be the common substance or base of those separated or diverging parties" (2003, p. 350; trans. 2005b, pp. 31–32; italics added). For instance, "even though the corporeal as such and the spiritual as such may be foreign to each other," as the corporality and the spirituality of this or that specific individual they nonetheless are indivisible in their individual determination—"the concrete individual is ... a unity" (pp. 350–351; trans. p. 32). The individual is not only someone who consists of a mind and a body but someone who *has* a mind and a body (see Simmel 2004b, p. 261), and thus stands beyond the opposition: the indivisible unity of the individual is as if a "third"<sup>3</sup> reconciling the contrast between the mind and the body.

<sup>3</sup> Simmel's famous notion of the "third" serves as a kind of general characterization and basic schema of his thought (see Freund 1976; Noro 1991). It is Simmel's style and even part of his "method" to play with paradoxes, dualisms, and ambiguities, only to introduce then a mediating "third" to the antagonism. Sometimes this "third" presents the "excluded third" of logic, other times perhaps the origin of opposites, their midpoint, resulting in unity, or an expression of an encompassing unity between surface level polarizations (cf. Levine 1971, p. xxxv). The "third" may intertwine the opposites by culminating their tension, dissolve apparently monolithic unities into interaction of opposing forces, or establish a common ground or some "underlying coherence" (see e.g., Featherstone 1991, p. 5), but only rarely does it bring a final synthesis between the opposing poles.

In other words, the individual is indivisible for Simmel, yet one whose unity consists of nothing other than dualities—the unity of the individual is ever capable of existing only in the form of a dualities. This marks the cornerstone of Simmel's notion of the *individuum duplex*, so to speak. It is best articulated in the essay "Individualismus" (2000b), which was published in 1917, only one year before his decease. In the piece, Simmel asserts that both our relation to the "world," to which we belong as a particular part, and our relation to our self, which is a whole in itself, open up precisely in the form of *individual existence*. For Simmel, individuality is the form *par excellence* in which the double nature of human existence is able to manifest itself and make itself felt as a unity: on the one hand, every individual is a part of a greater whole, be it the divine, natural, or societal order; on the other, each and every one is also a self-enclosed whole, a self-sufficient being, and a unique world unto oneself. According to Simmel, the existence of every "spiritual being" (*geistige Wesen*) that can be regarded as "one" (*eines*), that is, as a singular and independent entity, is structured according to this duality. The individual is a being which is at once in relation to something extraneous, to a larger whole, and something which stands against that whole according to its singular form. The individual "is always member and body, part and whole, complete and in need of completion" (Simmel 2000b, p. 300).

Even though Simmel is very explicit here about the fact that the individual is a doublet, what is, however, left curiously open in the piece "Individualismus" is the specific *relation* between the different sides of the individual. Simmel only argues *that* there are two sides to every individual, he does not reflect much on *how* they relate to one another. However, he had specified that relation *historically* already around the turn of the century in his works when discussing 18th and 19th century forms of individualism. Ultimately, they provide a basis for understanding not only the *social* relation of what Simmel calls "quantitative" and "qualitative" forms of individuality but also the difference between the two forms in terms of the *methodological* purposes each serves for Simmel. These issues will be discussed next.

### Quantitative versus Qualitative Individuality

From the above sketched antagonism between part and whole stems for Simmel "the cardinal question" for every view of life and world: "is the individual an ultimate point of origin of what happens in the world, is one according to one's essence as individual creative, or is the individual a point of passage for forces and currents of supraindividual provenance" (2001, pp. 391–392)? Hence, the decisive question is whether the individual is someone who "creates" or someone who "adjusts"—an *endogenous* or an *exogenous* being.<sup>4</sup>

Except for his predilection for romanticizing the heroic individuality of his idols Rembrandt, Rodin, or Goethe, for instance, in his work Simmel does not give clear precedence to either of these views on the individual (see Giacomoni 1997, p. 20).

<sup>4</sup> For the concepts endogenous and exogenous individuality see Köhnke (1996, pp. 492, 498, 500).

On the contrary, he ties them together and exposes their rivalry (Schroer 2001, pp. 314–316, 335). To tackle their duality and to be able to pay due regard to both poles, Simmel employs the duplex notion of individuality as “quantitative individuality” on the one hand, and “qualitative individuality” on the other. Whereas the quantitative meaning of individuality refers to the *freedom* and *self-responsibility* that a person gains in wider social circles as opposed to more limiting small groups, its qualitative meaning pertains to the fact that a person *differs* from others in the form or content of one’s being and action (Simmel 1992a, p. 811).

As is well known, Simmel bases these categories on two historical forms of individualism. He views the 18th century individualism expressed in liberalism and rationalism as a pre-stage for the development of the 19th century of individualism of romanticism and modernity.

More than attesting to the existence of particular kinds of individuals in each era, these individualisms rather refer to different *idea(l)s* of individuality held at the time. In the 18th century, the primary manifestation of individuality was according to Simmel *freedom* coupled with *equality* (*Gleichheit*). It was an era, as Simmel sees it, when the strivings of individuals opposed their socio-historical ties in the most fierce manner. As many of the institutional bonds (religious, political, agrarian, etc.) were realized to create sharp inequalities between individuals, a call for the liberation from the suppressive ties was made in the name of equality of all. Simmel calls this individualism “abstract,” because it was not concerned with any concrete individuals in their particularity but only with the “the general human being” (*der allgemeine Mensch*), with the human as such. For it, the entire value of every human being lay in their being human. This value was thus the same with each and every one. In the terms of law, whether that of human nature, of reason, or of morality, every individual was considered as being equal (Simmel 1989a, p. 493; 1992a, pp. 811–812; 1995a, pp. 50–52, 131; 1999, pp. 128–137; 2001, pp. 389–390).

According to Simmel, in the 19th century, the unity of freedom and equality peculiar to 18th century individualism was dissolved into two separate paths. The first is socialism, which for Simmel is characterized by the tendency toward equality without freedom. The other, on the contrary, amounts to what he regards as a specifically *modern* individualism developing in the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Friedrich Nietzsche: *freedom without equality*. Just as the individualism of the 18th century, this modern 19th century individualism regards every human being as a compendium of humanity—not, however, as an example of the general human being as did the first, but in terms of one’s uniqueness and specificity. Whereas in the heart of liberalism and socialism there lies the idea of “levelling” (*Nivellement*) expressed in the idea(l) of equality and similarity of all humans, modern individualism is based upon the notion of “difference” (*Ungleichheit*);<sup>5</sup> upon the distinctiveness of individuals. It was thought that every individual is unique, and it was demanded that each and every one also express and realize one’s ownmost ideal, which was shared with no one else. This laid considerable emphasis upon the relation to the self: cultivating one’s

<sup>5</sup> *Ungleichheit* could also be translated as “inequality,” as with Nietzsche, but Simmel’s use of it does not imply anything of the kind. It refers only to the divergence or dissimilarity of individuals.

individuality became a downright ethical ideal. Freedom was no longer understood in the sense of sheer negative freedom, as freedom from something, but in the positive sense, as freedom to something. And it was precisely in expressing one's individuality that individuals were supposed to use their freedom (1989a, p. 493; 1992a, pp. 812–813; 1995a, pp. 52–53, 131; 1999, pp. 137–146).

Simmel emphasizes that 19th century individualism did not simply dissolve 18th century individualism for good. Rather, the two reside side by side. Finding a synthesis between them seems to Simmel to be the key task of the 20th century (1904, p. 180; see also 1995a, p. 56). The simultaneous co-existence of the two can, according to him, be observed in the modern metropolis. As he maintains in the famous piece “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben,” known best as the “metropolis” essay, Simmel thinks that the modern metropolis offers a site for the co-presence of these individualisms as the two *social* forms of metropolitan individuality; both their contrast and the attempts to overcome it take place in the space of the metropolis (1995a, p. 131). Simmel regards the *individuality of equality* (*Individualismus der Gleichheit*) as the counterpart of 18th century individualism. It fulfils the promise of the ideal of liberalism: in the metropolis, the individual has considerable freedom of movement both in the physical, social, and mental senses. Compared to the smaller social circles of the countryside and smaller towns, the social circles of the metropolis are notably large and loose in terms of their integration and normative coherence. This provides the individual with an unparalleled amount of freedom and self-responsibility (p. 126). However, besides being relatively free, according to Simmel city dwellers also try to appear as individually *unique*. The uniqueness specific to an individual relates to the individualism of the 19th century. Due to the wealth of people and stimuli in the metropolis, the individual has to emphasize his or her specific characteristics in order to stand out. The impersonal life of the metropolis demands developing the personal uniqueness of the individual. The reverse side of this metropolitan *individuality of difference* is empty exaggeration: one is easily led to adopt extreme extravagancies and caprices, the meaning of which lies purely in the *form* of being different, empty of any content (pp. 128, 131).

In their fundamental opposition, the individuality of equality and the individuality of difference, according to Simmel, nevertheless have one thing in common: the possibility for the development of both stems from the widening of social circles (1992a, p. 814), resulting from such phenomena as the extensification of the network of money transactions, growth of population, and high economic division of labor (see 1992a, pp. 813, 831–832; 1995a, pp. 127–128). This is an important point. After all, Simmel's argument implies that qualitative individuality, even though not being reducible to the social environment, is nonetheless *socio-historically conditioned*. Social relations of interaction create new kinds of possibilities and intensities for its emergence. Both forms of individuality can emerge and develop only in relatively large groups which, in contrast to the more restricted relationships within the context of small social circles, allow individuals to develop their autonomy and personal qualities.

*Methodologically*, however, these notions serve for Simmel completely different ends. Quantitative individuality is an auxiliary concept for the sociology of social

forms to study individuals embedded in social relations and as elements of masses (Köhnke 1996, p. 501). From a sociological perspective, as Simmel coins it, “the human being is in one’s whole essence determined by the fact that one lives in reciprocal interaction with other people” (1992a, p. 15; 1999, p. 72). Sociology considers the individual primarily as a part of a broader social environment, a larger social whole, be that society or whatever supraindividual social formation; the individual is conceived of as a product of social relations, as an intersection of social circles (see e.g. Simmel 1992a, pp. 467–466; 2000a, p. 237). This was the notion of individuality that Simmel himself subscribed to in his early phase. For instance, in *Über soziale Differenzierung* (1989b) he emphasizes that individuality has no inner essence but is “maintained through the combination of circles, which in any case could also be different” (p. 244).

However, even though Simmel also employs the notion of qualitative individuality when examining the forms of modern individuality in the sphere of the metropolis and money economy, in his work it refers above all to a philosophical interpretation of the individual. Indeed, as Simmel moved more and more toward aesthetics, he began to put more stress on the qualitative meaning of individuality. Consequently, at the latest from the essay on the poet Stefan George, published in 1901, onwards Simmel began to seek a solution to the antinomy between the individual and the general increasingly in art instead of in social forms. Especially Nietzsche’s philosophy was of crucial importance for Simmel in this shift of emphasis in the problem of modern individuality (see Lichtblau 1997, p. 88). For Nietzsche, the value of humanity was measured with respect to rare individuals, and not in the majority, i.e., society—instead of democratic equality between individuals Nietzsche emphasized qualitative difference and the distance between them (Simmel 1992b, p. 118; 1995a, p. 60; 1995b, p. 183; 1999, pp. 125–126). Simmel’s version of qualitative individuality culminates in the notion of “individual law,” an aesthetic notion which later turns into an ethical principle in his philosophy of life.

### Type and Individual Law

In Simmel’s work, the difference between sociologically framed individuality reducible to social relations and the qualitative meaning of individuality expressed in the social milieu yet irreducible to it can be clarified by exploring his two concepts of “type.”

For Simmel, typification was the manner in which he grasped, and operated with, reality in his sociology when describing and interpreting social phenomena (Giacomoni 1997, p. 21). His preoccupation with the “typical” is well articulated, for instance, in the famous passage from the essay “Soziologische Aesthetik” (1992b) in which where he holds that:

For us, the essence of aesthetic observation and interpretation lies in the fact that the typical is to be found in what is unique, the law-like in what is fortuitous, the essence and significance of things in the superficial and transitory (p. 198).

At least equally famous must be the *socio-psychological* types Simmel discusses in his work: the cynic, the blasé person, the stranger, the faddist (*Modenarr*), the urbanite, etc. These types are crystallizations of interactions in certain times and places, and as such they supplement Simmel's analyses of social forms. What is common to these types is that they are all defined by the features of social relations. Simmel stresses that the stranger, for instance, does not just stand outside a group but the outside is rather "an element of the group itself": "to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation, a specific form of interaction." The stranger's position in the "group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he does not belong to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it which do not and cannot stem from the group itself" (1992a, p. 765).

For Simmel, the typical cannot be equated with the objective-universal anymore than with the subjective-individual; rather, "type" presents a dimension between the general applicable to each particular cases and the irreducibility of the individual (Giacomoni 1997, p. 21). Type stands as a mediating middle term between the general and the specific, the distributed and the unique.

Type does not have any "transcendent essence" (Morris-Reich 2003, p. 136), but is rather nothing but a product of comparison between empirical exemplars, as Heinz-Jürgen Dahme (1981, p. 389) has pointed out. The social forms of individuality are a good example of this. Ultimately, they can be understood as social or socio-psychological types. They are not limited solely to the single individual but rather "something turned toward the outside": individual freedom does not pertain to any specific individuals but to the liberation of all, and the qualitative sense of individuality results from social comparison—it "consists of being different from others, of distinguishing oneself" (Simmel 2003, p. 422; trans. 2005b, p. 87). Simmel calls these forms of individuality "sociological," as they transcend the individual in one's absolute singularity towards a social type that is shared by several persons.

In "Wie ist Gesellschaft möglich?" ("How is society possible?"), the famous excursus to the first chapter of *Soziologie*, Simmel asserts that, to an extent, people always perceive other individuals as representatives of a type, as generalized: as men, fathers, laborers, aged, music lovers, having a certain nationality, and so on (1992a, pp. 47–50). We can never know other individuals completely, and therefore we are forced to complete our images of them with certain typical qualities which the person in question shares with others. This is also to say that the type is never identical to the individual in his or her singularity. The type is "always at once more and less than the individual" (p. 50): more insofar as the type holds for several individuals, less insofar as the individuality of a person is not exhausted by the type. In the second part of the *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* (1911), Simmel notes that the idea that an individual is nothing but the instance of a type is nonsense; the individual would be equivalent to a sheer concept and lack any personal color and qualities whatsoever (p. 97).

This statement can be interpreted both sociologically and philosophically. From a sociological perspective, we can interpret it to mean that no one is reducible to a *single* type but everyone is rather a combination of many types. In *Philosophie des Geldes*, Simmel writes in a manner that is in concordance with this line of thought:

Only the combination and fusion of several traits in one focal point forms a personality which then in its turn imparts to each individual trait a personal-subjective character. It is not that it is this *or* that trait that makes a unique personality of man, but that he is this *and* that trait (1989a, p. 393; trans. 2004c, p. 296).

However, as regards the philosophical idea of individual uniqueness, the different traits that a person has—or is—cannot mark the absolute singularity of that person, since these traits, as Simmel notes in *Rembrandt*, “are shared with countless others.” In fact, Simmel argues, “What we like to call the ‘personal’ aspect of people—the external circumstances of their lives (their social position, whether married or unmarried, rich or poor)—is precisely that which is not personal about them” (2003, p. 374; trans. 2005b, p. 50). These aspects are merely *typical*: “All individual characteristics are generalities” (2003, p. 396; trans. 2005b, p. 67). It would be easy to misinterpret this and read it as a statement that all that is individual is in fact typical. However, this is not what Simmel is saying here. The sentence should be read with emphasis on the word “characteristics”—all individual *characteristics* are typical. One is typical in *what* one is.

Yet this is not all there is to Simmel’s conception of type. In *Lebensanschauung* (1999), Simmel expands on his discussion of type by introducing a completely other kind of type. Unlike the social type shared with others, this new notion of type pertains to the absoluteness of one’s subjectivity. Simmel maintains that “We are all fragments, not only fragments of a social type or of a type of a soul [*seelischen*] depictable with generic concepts but, as it were, fragments of the type that only we ourselves are” (p. 280). It is something singular, our ownmost type, although something we are only *ideally*: we actualize the type in what we do and say and are only to a lesser extent. However, we are constantly measured against it. This is consistent with much of our everyday experience: it is not unusual that we say this or that to be so “typical” of someone we know, or that when people do something that does not fit our image of them we note that they are not “themselves.” It is as if there were an idea of each of us, of someone who is truly us but who we are only ideally, with whom our actual being, doings, and sayings can either correspond or break faith.

Accordingly, even if Simmel does not explicate the conceptual difference between the two types, we could put it as follows: whereas the social type is made typical by the fact that it is *distributed*, what makes our own type typical is its *ideal* nature. Whereas the social type expresses what is special about an individual through something that is common to many individuals (Giacomoni 1997, pp. 21–22), the ideal type of an individual expresses that which is typical of an individual in his or her singular existence.

The ideal nature of our ownmost type affords at least three different interpretations. First, it can be interpreted in accordance with Simmel’s doctrine of the “three worlds” which was not that far from Bernard Bolzano’s metaphysics of different realms in his *Wissenschaftslehre* or those held by the neo-Kantians such as Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Windelband. One could interpret the individual type to be an already pre-existent model, which has an ideal validity independent of

its actual realization. In this sense, type would be analogous to Simmel's concept of "form," which according to Simmel is independent of the fact of whether it is realized one thousand times or not even once (see 1911, p. 116; 1989a, p. 31; 1992a, p. 26; 1996, p. 113; 1999, p. 329). However, what separates the individual type from form is that whereas one and the same form "can occur in two, or in an unlimited number, of existences" (2003, p. 397; trans. 2005b, p. 68), one's ownmost type is unique; it is bound to the absolute singularity of the individual.

Therefore, against the first interpretation, it is possible to argue that the individual type is *not* something always already valid. Rather, it has to be *created*. This is the second line of interpretation. Simmel's notion of philosopher's type suffices as an example of this. In *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (1996), Simmel holds that momentous philosophical achievements are each characterized by a conception of the world that expresses its creator's ideal determination and irreplaceable nature, "an inner objectivity of a personality, which follows only its own law" (p. 29). This inner objectivity is not reducible to the subjectivity of the philosopher's person any more than to a transcendental archetype or to an objectivity extraneous to the particular individual and his or her life. On the contrary, beyond the individual subjectivity as well as the objectivity which is supposed to be "universally convincing," there must be, Simmel maintains, "a third in the human being [*Menschen*]." And, according to Simmel:

... this third has to be the soil in which philosophy has its roots—indeed, the existence of philosophy even necessitates as its presupposition that there be such a third. This third might be termed—to use an approximate characterization—the layer of *typical* spirituality [*Geistigkeit*] in us. (p. 28)

Another counter-example against the interpretation of the type as already "ready" is offered by the artistic personality and its "individual law" (Simmel 1993, p. 377)—a notion which Simmel most probably appropriated from Schleiermacher. The individual law can be regarded as being analogous to the type of the philosopher. Simmel writes in "Das Problem des Stiles" (1993) that, facing a statue by Michelangelo, a religious painting by Rembrandt, or for instance a portrait by Velasquez, the question of what these works share with others of their style and period becomes irrelevant to us (p. 374). This is because Simmel thinks that "these great figures have created a mode of expression flowing from their very individual genius, which we now sense as *the general character in all their individual works*" (pp. 375–376; trans. 1991, p. 64; italics added). Despite its heroic imprint, this statement reveals something essential: the great figures have *created* their ownmost style; it is not something that would exist before and outside the actual works of art but has to be extracted from them. The personality of the artist is not the person of the real author, but an ideal edifice (Simmel 1995a, pp. 31–33; cf. 1993, p. 376): it resides only in the works and nowhere else. For instance, Simmel states of Michelangelo that his individual law, the style of his works which he is himself "is expressed in and colours all artistic utterances of Michelangelo, but only because it is the root-force of the[se] works and these works only" (1991, pp. 64–65; 1993, p. 376).

The third possible interpretation of the ideal nature of type is that it presents an *obligation*. In Simmel's philosophy of life, culminating in the posthumously published book *Lebensanschauung* (1999), his "philosophical testament," the notion of individual law appears as the basis of an individualized ethics. In an ethical sense, fulfilling one's type, one's individual law, becomes a moral "must" (*Sollen*): "The whole existence [of an individual] *must* be such and such, regardless of the way it is in reality" (p. 383). With his notion of individual law, Simmel tries to dissolve the opposition of law and individuality posited in Kant's moral philosophy. According to Simmel's reading of Kant, the cornerstone of Kantian ethics and the notion of categorical imperative is the assumption that an ideal cannot be anything individual but only general. Kant regards generality as the essence of any ethical law: for him, a law cannot be determined by the concrete living individual but has to determine it (pp. 365–366). By introducing the notion of individual law, Simmel questions this unity of law and generality taken as self-evident in the Kantian ethics, and introduces the idea of the purely individual existence itself as law-like. For Simmel (2001), Kant's categorical imperative signifies "violence done to the one through the many, a leveling of the specific through the typical" (p. 426). The individual law, on the contrary, is a moral "must" which is valid not because it holds for each and everyone, but because it holds precisely for *me*: "first and foremost it is *I* who has to do it, it belongs to the circle of *my* obligations, and the image of *my* existence gains or loses in worth through its fulfillment or omission" (p. 442). That is, the obligation does not fall upon the individual as if coming from outside, but it stems from the vital process and unity of *the individual's life* itself, from the same source as the fulfillment demanded (1999, p. 382). The notion of individual law thus represents a doctrine of a "vitalized" and "individualized" ethics (see e.g. 2001, pp. 444, 446, 448, 457, 466, 469–470; Levine 1991, pp. 110–111): it commences from the idea that individual life is responsible to no instances other than itself; the life course of an individual runs in absolute self-responsibility and incomparability.<sup>6</sup>

### The Mortal Individual

The notion of the individual law takes us finally to Simmel's philosophy of life. In *Lebensanschauung*, Simmel sets out to philosophize on "life," not only in terms of the life of an individual, but on life itself, devoid of all contents. Influenced by the German tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* (Arthur Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey) as well as French *vitalism* (Henri Bergson), Simmel conceives of life as a *process*. According to Simmel (2003), life constantly reaches out beyond its present form, tries to go beyond itself (p. 385). Thus "becoming" is the essence and peculiar mode of being of life. Life is always in the making: "It never *is*; it is always *becoming*" (p. 321; trans. 2005b, p. 11).

<sup>6</sup> For a critical assessment of Simmel's notion of individual law see Rolf Engert's *Über die Zulänglichkeit des individuellen Gesetzes als Prinzip der Ethik* (1917/2002, esp. pp. 48–57).

However, as soon as we turn from bare biological life to conscious *human* life, a completely new image arises. Human life is not sheer absolute flow, but it is manifested in the self-enclosed, limited form of the *individual*. According to Simmel (1999):

human life [...] stands under the double aspect: on the one hand, we are thrown into and adapted to cosmic movement, yet on the other hand we feel and conduct our individual existence from our own center, as self-responsible and, as it were, in self-enclosed form (p. 319).

Out of this duality develops for Simmel the “ultimate metaphysical problematic of life” (p. 222): how can we understand life at the same time as unrestricted continuity and as the life of an individual? That is, on the one hand, life exists only in individuals: “individuality is living through and through, and life is individual through and through” (p. 227). As the individual “exists as a unity unto itself, gravitating toward its own center,” the reaching out that is the essence of life is not without a subject, but “remains somehow bound up with the center” (p. 222; trans. 1971b, p. 363). The shortcoming of the image of life as a Heraclitean flux is precisely that it lacks the individual which reaches out.

Yet on the other hand, the process of life traverses and transgresses the individual. The self-enclosed, limited form of the individual in its being-for-itself and in-itself is fundamentally opposed to the continuous flux of life. Conceived of as the simple fact of living, which the Greeks termed *zoē*, bare life (Agamben 1998, p. 1), the process of life is not confined within the individual. It only suffices to think of the fact that life as such does not disappear along with the death of a single individual but it both precedes and continues to exist after him or her (Simmel 1999, p. 227). Simmel phrases this in the following manner:

the individual is mortal but the species is not; if one looks further, the individual species is mortal but life is not; life is mortal but matter is not; eventually, matter may pass away as a specific case of being, but being does not (p. 326).

The quotation alludes to another important point, namely, to the mortality of the individual. For Simmel, it is ultimately *death* which provides a possibility for thinking life and individuality together without any fracture (pp. 325–326; Schwerdtfeger 1995, p. 95). The life of an individual receives its specific form through the fact that it is mortal: unlike an inorganic body (*Körper*) which finds its limits determined from the outside, the form of an organic being, according to Simmel (1999), is fundamentally limited from the inside, by the fact that it shall die (p. 297). So, death as that which ultimately abolishes life belongs originally and innerly to its very existence. Simmel frames this in a dialectical fashion by stating that “life demands, from itself, death as its opposite, as its ‘other’” (p. 308; 2001, p. 85). And, as this other, death is not external to but immanent in life. It is not something that, as it were, determines our lives only just at the moment we die, as for instance the figure of the Grim Reaper cutting the thread of life would suggest as a spatial symbol of death. On the contrary, death affects and sets the tone for every moment and content of our life (1992a, p. 102; 1993, p. 349; 1999, p. 298; 2001, p.

82; 2003, p. 401; Jalbert 2003, p. 266). As Simmel (1999) puts it: “In each and every moment of life we *are* of the kind that we will die” (p. 299). There is absolute certainty *that* we shall die; the only thing we do not know is *when* this is going to happen (p. 301).

Death thereby belongs to the life of the individual as its positivity and as one of its possibilities. Here Simmel makes a distinction into being-killed and dying. Whereas in being-killed death remains something alien to life, something that falls upon it from the outside, in dying, by contrast, death is an “internal possibility and constant companion of life,” as Jalbert (2003, p. 271) has interpreted Simmel. For Simmel (1999), the capability to die is the mark of a higher, individual existence (p. 326). He argues that non-individual beings may be killed or have their thread of life suddenly and accidentally cut off, but it is only individuals who are capable of dying (pp. 300, 328, 330; Jalbert 2003, p. 272). “Where the individuals are not distinguished, there the immortality of the species swallows up the mortality of the individual” (Simmel 1999, p. 325). Here the individual is not yet “irreplaceable” (*Unersetzlich*) and “non-repeatable” (*Unwiederholbar*)—” The question of mortality becomes altogether acute only just in respect of the genuine [*eigentlichen*] individual” (p. 325). This is also to say that death is not one and the same for all beings. On the contrary, each and every individual has a death of one’s own, one’s ownmost death. In *Rembrandt* (2003), Simmel quotes Rainer Maria Rilke’s poetic expression: “*O Herr, gib jedem seinen eignen Tod*” (p. 410).<sup>7</sup>

When an individual dies, we experience a loss of the person’s very *type*: “The essence of individuality is that the form cannot be abstracted from its content and still retain its meaning. ... the human individual, really grasped as pure individuality, is the unrepeatable form” (Simmel 2003, p. 373; trans. 2005b, pp. 48–49). The unique possibility for the *realization* of the form of an individual is lost for good with the death of that individual (1999, pp. 329–330). “That the same existence could occur twice” is according to Simmel (2003) “quite nonsensical” (p. 397; trans. 2005b, p. 68; cf. 2001, p. 417): “the particular life cannot be deprived of its being-only-once” (2003, p. 424; trans. 2005b, p. 89).

For Simmel (1999), the capability to die captures thus “the proper definition of individuality”: the more individual a being is, the more constitutive death is for it (p. 330). Or perhaps it would in fact be better to speak of *singularity* instead of individuality. The singularity of the individual presents itself as the third notion of the individual besides quantitative and qualitative individuality. Whereas individuality, in its quantitative and qualitative forms, is a social formation that can be understood in terms of social relations, the singular life of the individual is both immanent in and transcendent to the socio-historical milieu. It is placed at the same time beyond history and within history: life both escapes social relations and has to adapt to them.

The notion of quantitative individuality presents the singularity of the individual, in the last instance, as nothing but an *illusion*. Given that according to quantitative individuality, the individual is nothing but a “point where the social threads woven throughout history interlace” (Simmel 1922, p. vi; Jalbert 2003, p. 264), in this

<sup>7</sup> “Oh Lord, give each a death of his own”.

conception the individual does not have a life (nor death) that would belong just to itself, since its very “inwardness” (*Inneres*) is considered as being constituted by supraindividual social forces (Simmel 2001, pp. 391–392). Hence it subjects the singular individual to the formal similarity of individuals. Also the qualitative sense of individuality makes the individual dependent on the social milieu; it is only social comparison which enables qualitative individuality to have a social articulation—here individuality results from being different *from* others and *to* others. Qualitative singularity, by contrast, is, in the sense of one’s non-repeatable existence, completely beyond the question of the similarity and dissimilarity, the comparability and incomparability of individuals. It does not pertain to *what* one is, but to *that* one is, to the fact that one exists only once:

Even if an existence, in one or all of its stages, would look exactly the same as some other one, it would nevertheless be, with all of its preconditions, derivations, and borrowings—as a life process; as a reality of becoming—just this unique current (Simmel 2003, p. 398; trans. 2005b, p. 68).

Life itself has here the characteristic of ontological singularity.

## Conclusion

Simmel’s theorizing on individuality is a theme widely discussed in the secondary literature. It is typically treated in terms of the possibilities and threats for the development of individuality in the modern metropolis, the increase of individual freedom in the mature money economy, and the growing separation of subjective and objective culture, which Simmel examines under the rubric of the “tragedy of culture.” In this essay, however, I have tried to render Simmel’s insights in another light by focusing on the ambiguities that lie at the heart of individuality, giving special emphasis to the ontological and existential issues crucial to Simmel’s theorizing on the individual. Accordingly, these issues call for a *philosophical turn* for the sociological thought of the individual. By way of conclusion, in what follows I try to outline the contemporary relevance of Simmel’s insights as well as specify this “philosophical turn.”

As should be evident by now, Simmel’s contribution is not first and foremost that he furnished the notion of the individual with an unambiguous and precise meaning. Rather, what his writings accomplish is, *first*, that they reveal the deep ambiguity, laden in the concept, between the who and the what of the individual: on the one hand, the individual is an absolute singularity, *someone* unique and non-repeatable, on the other, one is composed of *something*, of more or less typical traits shared with others. Therefore the way Simmel distinguishes between these two dimensions of the individual could clarify the sense in which the term individuality is used in various discourses. For instance, it is quite obvious that the views claiming individuality to be at risk do not mean that quantitative individuality, that is, the differentiation and specification of social roles, would somehow be under threat. They rather refer to the loss or demise of the qualitative uniqueness and irreplaceability of individuals. Accordingly, Markus Schroer (2001, pp. 333–334) has noted that Simmel establishes

a connection between two different theoretical traditions of thinking the individual. On the one hand, with his notion of quantitative individuality, he comes close to the differentiation theory of Durkheim, which was later taken up in an extended and slightly different form by Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann. On the other hand, Simmel's notion of qualitative individuality resonates in the fairly pessimistic *Zeitdiagnose* of Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber, as well as in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's famous theorizing on the "end of the individual." Likewise, even though Michel Foucault does not share a theoretical interest in the same problems as Simmel, the Hellenistic and Stoic care of the self amongst free men that Foucault investigates in the second and third volume of his *History of Sexuality* lays a fairly similar emphasis upon the relation to the self as did the 19th century ideal of the cultivation of qualitative individuality Simmel describes.

*Secondly*, Simmel's theorizing not only bridges the gap between the two theoretical traditions but, as it was argued above, we can tease out of his writings how the what and the who of the individual relate to each other socio-historically, existentially, and methodologically. The socio-historical relations create possibilities and intensities for the emergence and development of individuality. The duality of the who and the what intimates that we lead simultaneously a double existence—not only in the sense of being social, on the one hand, and individual, on the other, as Durkheim assumes, but these antagonistic forces appear already and precisely in that we are *individuals*. Together with the sociohistorical conditions of qualitative individuality, this implies, somewhat surprisingly, that for Simmel, the "theorist of individuality," the social domain is in fact much more pervasive, much more closely related to our individual being than it is for Durkheim. Even our so called "personal" traits which Durkheim regards—not that differently from the way we tend to perceive the individual today—as that which makes us individuals are already social.

However, the notion of *singularity*, proposed as the third term of the individual, drew attention to the fact that individual's singular life is not exhausted by the socio-historical milieu. This is the *third* important point we can extract from Simmel's theorizing. That is, while not being completely immune to social relations but rather both constrained and invested by them, an individual's life also transgresses the social sphere as it appears as that in which such relations are rooted—ultimately, it is life which produces and engulfs them. This idea bears interesting affinity with the famous theme of "bio-power" raised by Foucault (1990). Bio-power sets a new mode of relation between socio-historical forms of power/knowledge and life; Foucault employs the term "to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life" (p. 143). Bio-power seeks to govern life, to optimize, reinforce, control, and organize its forces (p. 136). However, Foucault stresses that "It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them" (p. 143). Coming back to Simmel, his thoughts on the singularity of life can thus be seen as complementary with Foucault's ideas. While Simmel is not that elaborate on the relation of an individual's life and the attempts to govern it, Foucault explores in detail how modern politics is organized around the twofold problematic of life and the individual: at the threshold of modernity, Foucault argues, the individual becomes a problem for the techniques

of power and the forms of knowledge precisely as a specific living being and in relation to other living beings (p. 143). And while Foucault does not spend much time upon “life” itself, Simmel in turn poses the question of life very explicitly.<sup>8</sup> His philosophy of life highlights the tension between the impersonal and indefinite organic life that is sheer flux and the life of an individual that remains bound up with its center (and is thus also governable).

Also Foucault’s compatriot, commentator, and kindred spirit Gilles Deleuze has paid attention to the irreducibility of the process of life to the life of the individual. In his last piece of writing, “Immanence: A Life ...” (2001), Deleuze makes a lucid distinction between *the* life of an individual and “a life”. A life “is a haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization” (p. 29): “The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life” (p. 28). This “impersonal life,” as Giorgio Agamben (1999) holds, “coexists with the life of the individual without becoming identical to it” (p. 230). “A life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through” (Deleuze 2001, p. 29), and yet it is not confined to those moments nor to the form of the subject.

Acknowledging singularity calls for a philosophical turn for sociology. This does not mean abandoning sociology, but it rather has to be understood as a complementary move: in order to grasp both the what and the who of the individual, sociologists need to add a twist of more-than-sociology into their sociology.<sup>9</sup> As Simmel puts it at the end of *Soziologie* (1992a), “the social” amounts to nothing but one perspective on the human reality; *beyond* it stand those of the individual (in one’s singularity) and the human, which are as valid in their own right and correspondent to their own forms of examination and valuation (pp. 860–863). Simmel’s corrective to Durkheim’s maxim “explain the social with the social” would thus be: “but do not mistake the social for all there is!” Or perhaps even a completely a new conception of the social is needed, namely one in which, as John Rajchman (2001) puts it, “what we have in common is our singularities and not our individualities—where what is common is ‘impersonal’ and what is ‘impersonal’ is common” (p. 14).

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<sup>8</sup> Let us be reminded, however, that in his last published text, entitled “Life: Experience and Science,” Foucault reflects very explicitly on life itself. In the piece, Foucault (2000) specifies as the radical characteristic of life that it is “that which is capable of error” (p. 476): “Should not the whole theory of the subject be reformulated, seeing that knowledge, rather than opening onto the truth of the world, is deeply rooted in the ‘errors’ of life?” (p. 477.)

<sup>9</sup> As far as Simmel’s work is concerned, David Frisby (1981) has noted that “the absence of a rigid separation between sociology and philosophy would indicate that [Simmel’s] ostensibly ‘philosophical’ works might have great relevance for [his] sociology” (p. 23). Simmel’s philosophy is not “anti-sociology” but rather “more-than-sociology”, as Klaus Lichtblau (1984, p. 254; see also pp. 234–235) has described it.

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