

**Dominika Partyga**

## **Simmel's reading of Nietzsche: the promise of "philosophical sociology"**

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## Simmel's reading of Nietzsche: The promise of "philosophical sociology"

### Abstract

This article explores Simmel's engagement with Nietzsche to illuminate the dynamics of ethical agency in his late life-philosophy. The main argument is that Simmel's reworking of the Nietzschean themes of the *will to power*, distinction, and self-overcoming lays the ground for his vitalist ethics in *The View of Life*. An integrative reading across Simmel's intellectual biography points to the relevance of the Nietzschean doctrine of *eternal return* for Simmel's critique of abstract Kantian morality. The Nietzschean promise of life-affirmation is problematized in relation to the broader project of sociological metaphysics, which transgresses the boundaries between classical sociology and social philosophy. Opening up the grounds for a more sustained investigation into Simmel's engagement with Nietzsche, this article resonates with contemporary discussions on the ethics of the relational self and sociological vitalism.

### Keywords

Eternal return, ethical individualism, Nietzsche, self, sociality, Simmel, vitalism

Simmel's writings offer a variety of vantage points for conceptualizing individuality, pushing the sociological imagination to all kinds of limits, such as the self-referential metaphysics of life (Button, 2012: 153) and the mysticism of negative theology (Vandenbergh, 2010: 7). Regardless of the path we choose to follow, we arrive at some notion of a synthesis. Pyyhtinen (2010: 142; 2012: 284), for instance, argues for the originality of Simmel's approach in that the classical *homo duplex* perspective turns into *individuum duplex* as the social (relational) and the personal (non-social) dimensions of life become reconciled via the indivisible unity of the individual. Perhaps a similar kind of synthesis underlines Simmel's notion of a conceptually perfect society reconstructed in discussions on Simmel's utopia (Dodd, 2012: 153). In *How Is Society Possible?* the promise of a "fundamental harmony between the individual and the social whole" (Simmel, 2009: 50) is offered only to be withdrawn: the conceptually perfect society functions as a neo-Kantian regulative fiction – an intuitively enacted imperative that underwrites agents' knowledge of social life. Below the level of consciousness, we anticipate an ideal harmony in which our "being-for-itself, self-determining personality" can flourish while "playing a necessary part in the life of the whole" (Simmel, 2009: 52) – a state in which what is most unique and distinctive about individual personality becomes cultivated, rather than absorbed into the social whole.

Synthesis is also at the heart of the notion of "sociological metaphysics" recently reconstructed in the discussions on the relevance of Simmel's project for contemporary subjectivities (Harrington and Kemple, 2012: 10). In the closing chapter of *Soziologie*, Simmel (2009) returns to the ideal of a pervasive harmony between the individual and society:

The more unique someone is, the more one occupies a place that can be filled only by that person according to one's being, action, and fate and the more that place is reserved for that person alone in the order of the whole, the more is this whole to be grasped as a unity, a metaphysical organism in which every soul is a member, unable to be exchanged with any other, but presupposing all others and their working together for one's own life.

(p. 660)

This is a passage where various ways of navigating through Simmel's thinking meet: we can read it from the perspective of relational sociology where individuality is a function of difference subject to social relations, as an anticipation of Simmel's life-philosophy that centres around the unique individual, in hermeneutic terms of the balance between the whole and parts, or as a sign of Simmel's metaphysical, or even mystical longing (see Vandenbergh, 2010). The religious reading

may be on the edge of contemporary sociological discourse, but it is no less relevant. As Harrington and Kemple (2012: 10) point out, Simmel illustrates the notion of a synthesis with the Christian doctrine of the soul in which “individuals [...] are not only the sums of the qualities whereby they were naturally as different as those qualities are, but apart from those, each one is an absolute entity by virtue of personhood, freedom, and immortality” (Simmel, 2009: 661). In other words, individuality cannot be merely assembled at the intersection of social threads but involves an irreducible dimension of singularity.

The notions of a synthesis and God are rather odd places to encounter Nietzsche. Yet in *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (1986 [1907]) – a book Simmel considered his “chief work” (Liebersohn, 1988: 142) – we find him arguing that “in both Nietzsche’s thinking and in Christianity, the aim is to integrate the full and mature personality – who is the absolute bearer of value in this world – into a transcending meaning and goal structure of existence” (Simmel, 1986: 143). This passage reveals more than the originality of Simmel’s philosophical stance, as it foreshadows the ways in which Simmel’s synthesizing of various intellectual traditions will culminate a decade later in *The View of Life*, where value becomes ultimately embedded in the life process. We glimpse here the role Nietzsche – or rather a peculiar moral complexion of his thought – plays on Simmel’s route towards the life-philosophical conception of the sovereign self as a nexus of modern ethics. This role is ambivalent and puzzling in many respects: Simmel’s critique unfolds in a complex matrix of ideas, which locates Nietzsche not only in close relation to Christianity, but also Kant’s philosophical ethics.

There is a lot to be gained in unpacking the web of concepts that connects Simmel and Nietzsche: some scholars suggest that Simmel’s response to the tragedy of modern culture can be reconstructed precisely from this encounter (Frisby, 1987: 906, Pyyhtinen, 2008: 287, Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993: 124). Among various voices that acknowledge Simmel’s debt to the Nietzschean philosophy (Aschheim, 1992: 42, Frisby, 1985: 35, Liebersohn, 1988: 141–142, Lukács, 1980 [1962]: 442; Stauth and Turner, 1988: 206, Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993: 171–185), Levine (2012: 31) has most recently placed Simmel’s engagement with Nietzsche alongside his interest in Goethe: both philosophers represent “the principle of Life” in Simmel’s broader socio-metaphysical project. Yet only few investigations offer a more sustained insight into the recurring presence of Nietzsche within Simmel’s social theory (see exceptions: Button, 2012; Dodd, 2013; Lichtblau, 1984). As Weinstein and Weinstein (1993: 179) suggest, the multitude of threads one can follow in tracing Simmel’s Nietzsche(s) makes it impossible to ever draw a comprehensive picture of this complex affinity. With a thinker like Nietzsche, whose work deprives us of the fake comfort of definitive answers, such a quest would be perhaps self-defeating. Simmel (1986) himself warns us that “it is possible to select interpretations from Nietzsche’s writings that uncompromisingly contradict my interpretation of him,” though in a typically modernist fashion, he still aims to convey their “objective importance” (p. lv).

Leaving aside the question whether he succeeds – and if objective meaning can be ever found in Nietzsche – reconstructing Simmel’s critique can arguably shed light on his late moral philosophy, opening up crucial tensions in the life-philosophical conception of the individual subject as a locus of moral actions, so far neglected in discussions on Simmel’s sociological vitalism and his ethics of the self (Lash, 2005; Lee and Silver, 2012). Seen from within Simmel’s biography, Nietzsche’s importance lies in his “immoralism,” which is anything but a negation of morals (Simmel, 1986: 160). This is the line of argumentation framing this article, which aims to trace the connection between Simmel’s reading of Nietzsche and his late moral thought.

The discussion unfolds in four steps. First, I review and reconstruct the key themes of Simmel’s engagement with Nietzsche, drawing on *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (1986 [1907]), Simmel’s review of Ferdinand Tönnies’ *Nietzsche-Kultus* (1897) and a series of articles from Simmel’s middle period, which have not been translated into English: *Friedrich Nietzsche: Eine Moralphilosophische Silhouette* (1992a [1986]), *Zum Verständnis Nietzsches* (1995b [1902]), *Nietzsche und Kant* (1993 [1906]), and *Nietzsche’s Moral* (2011 [1911]).<sup>1</sup> In the second section, I consider the points on which Simmel fundamentally disagrees with Nietzsche, with a focus on Simmel’s socio-metaphysical reworking of the doctrine of the *will to power* and his controversial account of Nietzsche’s close relationship to

Christianity. Reconstructing Simmel's early-days critique lays grounds for the third, crucial section, where I trace the Nietzschean resonances in *The View of Life* (2010 [1917]) and provocatively argue that Simmel exaggerates his distance from Nietzsche in order to dramatize his break with Kant. Concluding, I draw broader implications of this encounter following the integrative line of critique that brings together Simmel's social and moral theory (Harrington and Kemple, 2012; Lee and Silver, 2012; Levine, 2012). Opening up the grounds for a more sustained investigation into Simmel's engagement with Nietzsche, this article argues for the contemporary relevance of Simmel's notion of *philosophical sociology* as a helpful starting point for reconsidering the interplay between social philosophy and classical sociology in the context of the broader project of "sociological metaphysics."

### **Simmel's reading of Nietzsche**

Simmel's critique brings into sharp focus both the normative and affirmative aspects of Nietzsche's canonical post-1882 works including *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Case of Wagner*. The appeal Simmel finds in Nietzsche rests on a life-philosophical approach towards his writings: he warns us both against rejecting Nietzsche's philosophy "ex cathedra" as a theoretical system (Simmel, 1992a: 116–117) and translating it into a reaction "political or especially social in character" (Simmel, 1994: 12). For Simmel (1994), the danger of the latter is evident in the ways "the new German youth" distorted Nietzsche's call for the revaluation of all values as a "justification for an unrestrained egoism" (p. 14). Similarly, Simmel (1897) argues, Tönnies "pushes Nietzsche to the absurd" in failing to acknowledge that Nietzsche's critique of slave morality is not the last step in the project of uprooting Western morality, but paves the way towards a new form of "objective idealism" (pp. 1646–1647), which could potentially bridge the gap between normativity and individualism. This is precisely the direction in which Simmel himself takes Nietzsche's arguments ten years later in *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*. Arguably, this book can be read as a continuation of Simmel's longstanding interest in "popularizing" Nietzsche's moral philosophy as an "intellectual *causa sui*" (Simmel, 1992a: 116) which takes life of its own beyond the decadent vocabulary, in a way that overturns rationalist and idealist interpretations of the ethical as a function of goals and consequences, opening up towards a more dynamic and creative process of realizing value from within the life process.

On Simmel's reading, Nietzsche offers an entirely new perspective on the relationship between individual personality and social structure with his distinction between the vantage points of humanity and society – a "breakthrough" in conceptualizing individuality beyond social relations (Simmel, 1986: 144). This distinction should be understood as a counterpoint against a fetishized understanding of the latter: society, like the concepts of nature or God in the past, has been used as an all-embracing, "flexible," and "undefined" explanatory category at best, or a "dogma" at worst (Simmel, 1986: 144). With such consideration, Simmel does not aim to push the Nietzschean correlation of humanity and individuality to its "antisociological" extremes (see Frisby, 1987: 907), but rather, to negotiate the Nietzschean ideal of a fundamentally sovereign mode of existence, which renders the most extraordinary individuals as bearers of all value. Simmel (1986) insists that these values, which culminate in the high points of humanity, are "only realized through socially formed existence," thus Nietzsche "underestimates the importance of social formation even for the development of individual values" (p. 145). This critique is mostly reflective of the direction in which Simmel himself will develop Nietzsche's arguments. Indeed, he immediately adds that "even Nietzsche" overcomes the myth of the self-sufficient, isolated individual, paraphrasing his famous dictum from the *Genealogy of Morals* where Nietzsche proclaims that the doer is merely a fiction added to the deed (Simmel, 1986: 145). What is at stake here, for Simmel, is of course neither the deconstruction of the subject nor even a more nuanced conception of causal agency, but the broader problem of a synthesis between the self and society.

This brings us to the question about the impact of Nietzsche's attempt to rethink the problem of the individual on the development of Simmel's own thought, which I will reconsider in the last

section. For now, it is important to understand the importance of the Nietzschean distinction between the vantage points of humanity and society. For Simmel (1992a), it involves an important shift in the moral theory of value: “a very peculiar turn [...] from the subjectively-human to the objective” (p. 120). This is where we enter a “sublime” realm in which the subjective and objective – or the self and society – are no longer in opposition: “it is not subjective pleasure that Nietzsche commands men to seek, but exactly the reverse, the *objective completeness* of being” (Simmel, 1994: 14).

Simmel’s interest in “objective idealism” can be qualified if we follow his reworking of the Nietzschean ideal of distinction (*Vornehmheit*) understood as the expansion of the self towards an ever-deferred horizon of excellence. The significance of this ideal has been widely recognized, particularly in relation to Simmel’s sociological treatment of distance (see Aschheim, 1992: 42; Liebersohn, 1988: 141; Lichtblau, 1984: 232) and forms of modern individualism in the sphere of mature money economy (see Dodd, 2013). In the context of Simmel’s intellectual biography, *Vornehmheit* plays a central role in Simmel’s (1897) defence of the Nietzschean philosophy as an inherently “moral” project (p. 1648), against predominantly negative responses of his own intellectual circle.<sup>2</sup> On Simmel’s (1992a) reading, the Nietzschean rapture with consequentialist and utilitarian traditions in philosophy is nothing less than a “Copernican deed,” which reverses the direction of ethics, as value becomes grounded in the expansive life-process (p. 124).

In *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, Simmel explores various aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy to defend this interpretation, but not without critical moves. Most importantly, he turns against neo-Darwinian evolutionism, insofar as it rests on a tautological theory of “objective” moral value grounded in the existence of few extraordinary individuals. For Simmel (1986), this kind of evolutionary ethic is a dead-end: “real evolution produces the negative with the same disinterested necessity as it generates the positive” (p. 165), but the ideal of infinite growth emerges in a more positive light when bounded through the doctrine of *eternal return*, understood as an attitude to life, rather than a cosmological or metaphysical theory. Simmel (1986) follows closely Nietzsche’s point about its emotional and moral significance, despite evaluating the doctrine as conceptually incoherent from a logical standpoint: the circular understanding of time yields an “enormous responsibility of man in light of the externalization of action by its continuous repetition” (p. 178).<sup>3</sup> Once bounded through the relation of self-responsibility, Simmel (1986) renders the ideal of nobility “the most sublime of sublimations” which “does not force life to go beyond itself into the transcendent realm” (p. 180).

Nobility, for Simmel (1986), should be then not taken literally, or even in socio-historical terms, but as a “special value-quality of the soul” (p. 179), perhaps a “nobility of mind” as Dodd (2013: 49) suggests. Simmel’s reworking of this concept has been discussed in terms of his intellectual debt to Nietzsche and Meister Eckhart (see Lichtblau, 1984; Vandenberghe, 2010: 22), but it is less clear what is at stake here in sociological terms. This dimension comes to the forefront in the *Excursus on the Nobility in The Expansion of the Group and the Development of Individuality in Soziologie*. Simmel (2009) argues here that nobility should be understood as a “special form of a unity of individuals” (p. 641) where “the value of the whole extends through each individual” (p. 648). Each representative inherits a socio-historical “foundation” that benefits him, but it is simultaneously “balanced by the formative strength rising to a certain extent out of the individual” (Simmel, 2009: 648). The distinction between the “decadent” and “more excellent” manifestations of nobility is important here: the latter involves a “feeling of [...] strong *independence*, but also of *responsibility*” (Simmel, 2009: 648). Only if bounded through such self-relation, the individual can flourish, becoming more than merely a superfluous link to the whole. This explains why Simmel (1986) criticizes Nietzsche for failing to stress out “that the specificity of his ideals is indivisibly linked to an essential and necessary mood of responsibility” (p. 169). Contextualizing Simmel’s (2009) distinction in this way, we glimpse again the promise of a synthesis, where “the self-sufficient, self-responsible, and satisfying existence is not a departure from the general well-being [...] but their development, protection, and enlargement” (p. 651).

Reconstructing the most important themes of Simmel's engagement with Nietzsche reveals a peculiar matrix of ideas, in which the self and society – or more broadly value (morals) and life – are no longer in opposition. Simmel's (2009) sociological understanding of nobility as a "solution to the balance between the whole and the individual" (p. 651) illustrates what are the stakes here: a new vocabulary to envision a synthesis between individual personality and social structure. As we will see, this synthesis becomes moralized a decade later in *The View of Life* where Simmel puts forward his life-philosophical conception of the subject. In this sense, Simmel's engagement with the Nietzschean notions of humanity, qualitative evolution and nobility surely allows him to problematize and rework various themes such as individuality, value, and society, but is there possibly some broader affinity between the thinkers?

### **Nietzsche, Christianity, and the *will to power***

Lukács (1980 [1962]), one of Simmel's most distinctive students, argues for a close proximity: "the only difference between them was that Nietzsche stated the aristocratic bias in an overt, reactionary-militant manner whereas Simmel, in accordance with the pre-war social situation, contented himself with a haughty aloofness from the 'crowd'" (p. 456). This might be an exaggerated account of the affinity between Simmel and Nietzsche – perhaps mostly reflective of Lukács' characteristic distaste for "nihilistic" tendencies in "imperialist" Germany – but it raises an important question that has been deferred so far. Beyond Simmel's efforts to capture Nietzsche as a "moralist," are there some points on which Simmel fundamentally disagrees with the philosopher? This section sheds more light on these aspects of Simmel's reading, with a focus on his reworking of the doctrine of the *will to power* and his controversial account of Christianity's "close relation" (Simmel, 1986: 142) to Nietzsche.

Simmel argues that the *will to power* illustrates Nietzsche's doctrine of values "at its climatic point" but only if it is "utilized beyond the domain of brutality where at first blush it seems to apply" (Simmel, 1986: 158). Leaving aside the questions about the nature of power dynamics in Nietzsche's thought, and whether Simmel captures their complexity, Simmel's broader aim here is to move beyond the traditional axiological conception of value in favour of a life-metaphysical understanding of the social:

Nietzsche should at least have made the boundary lines clear between his will to power and bare desire for possession, showing that there is value only in the qualities of individual souls expressed in social relations, and not in the external realities of domination and force. Only a metaphysical concept of life [...] could properly respond to the objections against a doctrine of rapine. For such a metaphysical interpretation, individuals would only be containers and forms, deprived of any real significance, inasmuch as the essential process of life as a whole would occur within and beyond them.

(Simmel, 1986: 159)

Simmel's (1986) efforts to downplay Nietzsche's "pathos of distance" culminate in his speculations about a quasi-vitalist society without the "dominating, surging, and all-consuming distance" in which "life flows constantly through all individual beings, giving meaning and significance to accidentally adapted forms" (p. 159). Consisting of individuals with evolving boundaries of selfhood, this society would be *relatively* unequal – as a result of individuals' unique positions on the floating matrix of life – yet one where the vital energy, starting from but non-exclusive to organic life, would flow as if "accidentally," through *each* individual: "individual bearers of life would not have the right to make any special demands" (Simmel, 1986: 159).<sup>4</sup> Deprived of the "aristocratic pathos," this speculative image is perhaps less of a utopia, than a sketch of Simmel's later life-metaphysical standpoint. This is

precisely the direction in which Simmel (2001) takes Nietzsche's argument four years later in his article *Nietzsche's Moral*, linking the doctrine of the *will to power* to the humanistic notion of evolution, understood not anymore in "a limited Darwinian sense," but as a struggle against the decline of life's creative powers, a struggle towards "more-life" (*mehr-Leben*) (p. 171). In this sense, Simmel endorses Nietzsche's evolutionism in its creative, self-generative dimension, and the *will to power* emerges as a vehicle for expansive individualism in relation to man as a species-being, rather than as a metaphysical principle of life's self-organization.

What is then the precise link between the concepts of evolution, value, and individualism in this web of ideas? This is where – rather surprisingly – Simmel's understanding of Christianity proves relevant. Perhaps provocatively, Simmel (1986) insists on a "great misunderstanding on Nietzsche's part" (1986: 140) when it comes to the Christian tradition. The argument is more nuanced than we might be tempted to think, because Simmel (1986) is of course well aware of Nietzsche's distaste for Christianity as a system of value judgments on "corrupt and declining life" (Simmel, 1986: 139). Indeed, Nietzsche's very "starting point," according to Simmel (1986: 5), is Christianity's institutional decline and enduring "spiritual" significance: with the death of God, the enterprise of giving meaning to life is not yet over. Moreover, in the final chapters of *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, Simmel (1986) goes on to rehearse Nietzsche's suspicions against slave morality, bad conscience, and herd instincts. In this context, the claim that Nietzsche "overlooks the Christian emphasis on the value of one's own soul" (Simmel, 1986: 140) is perhaps best understood as an argument in the theory of value rather than in the history of morality. Most Nietzsche scholars would surely insist that the two are inseparable, but let me briefly consider Simmel's argument, given the central role of the Christian doctrine in Simmel's speculations on "sociological metaphysics."

In the passage above, Simmel (1986) refers to *centripetal* value stemming from life's creative powers – value to be found in "the soul in its inner qualities" rather than, as any deontological argument would hold, "in the [...] action itself" (pp. 140–141). In this sense, the object of one's actions becomes profoundly irrelevant – unlike in the ethic of Kant, democracy and socialism. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination illustrates the point in a "strange and paradoxical way:" if believers act "virtuously" it is not because "action has religious value" – whatever they do is irrelevant to their salvation – but "they merely activate a mechanism that allows for recognition of a religious value situation" (Simmel, 1986: 141). Simmel's understanding of Christianity here is surely reflective of the rationalistic paradigm he explicates in the *Sociology of Religion*, where the religious is defined as a quality of social relationships, but in insisting that "the ultimate Christian concern is not with the negation of self [...] but with the internal quality of the person" (Simmel, 1986: 141), he seems to complicate the broader thesis that religion has a predominantly collective character.

The argument rests on a renewed view of Christianity as providing conditions for highest individuation, which comes to the forefront in Simmel's essay *On the Salvation of the Soul* from 1905. As Simmel (1997) puts it: "Christians have failed to take account of all the individualism inherent in the Christian concept of salvation, the idea that each person should make the most of his own talent" (p. 34). On Simmel's interpretation, the Christian concept of an after-life involves religious differentiation, rather than conformity:

The more the soul's salvation is based on its individuality, possibly beyond comparison with any other, the less the person will be able to find respite from having to concentrate on what is most personal and unique within the individual. The more perilous life is, the more exposed the individual's spiritual conviction, the more complete is his responsibility for his own self.

(Simmel, 1997: 34)

The last sentence in this passage sheds some light on the most puzzling aspect of Simmel's reading: if the Christian doctrine of salvation radicalizes individual's responsibility for herself during her earthly life, then Nietzsche might have possibly misunderstood the Christian doctrine of the soul as an "insurance policy" (Simmel, 1986: 141). For Simmel (1997), even the Calvinist belief in pre-

destination involves a “terrible inner danger” (p. 35). This resonates with Simmel’s reading of the Nietzschean category of expansive life which is free from external demands, indifferent to intentionality and thus: “partakes of the category of danger: the steeper the ascent, which alone makes existence worthwhile [...] the greater the danger of losing one’s balance” (Simmel, 1986: 141). If Simmel (1986) is serious about the link between Christianity and Nietzsche, the critical move is to show that the lived experience of Christianity is also a site of struggle and creatively realized value “under the sign of danger,” rather than the nihilistic “desire for security, warmth and peace” which Simmel indeed – recall Lukács’ criticism – attributes to the “broad masses of the bourgeoisie” (p. 141) rather than Christians. This account is surely controversial, but it helps to clarify what is at stake in Simmel’s reworking of the Nietzschean and Christian doctrines: a new theory of value to envisage a sovereign mode of individuality.

With this link, we arrive rather unexpectedly at the concept of the never-attainable *Übermensch*. On Simmel’s reading, it is a “name for the higher level of the same” (Simmel, 1995b: 59) rather than an entirely new stage in the development of humanity. Just as the doctrine of *eternal return*, it is best understood as an immanent imperative, a “functional ideal” of self-overcoming (Simmel, 1986: 175). This is where being (form) and becoming (life) merge in a synthesis, which is never absolute as any attempt to conceptualize life towards infinity involves irreconcilable tensions. These tensions find expression in an intriguing metaphor about the “dangerous proximity” of the *Übermensch*, who is at the same time “boundlessly distant” (Simmel, 1992a: 129). The paradox of distant closeness points towards the imminence of the danger that arises with the stark realization that life carries its own furthering. The same idea underpins Simmel’s (1986) interpretation of Christianity: only precarious, harsh, ever “more disciplined and severe” (p. 169) life can potentially save the individual. This is the kind of life in which everything is at stake, a life that ascends through struggle, ultimately embodied in the figure of the “noble man” who “must demand unbending severity towards himself and others” as only sacrifice yields “highest personal values” (Simmel, 1986: 168). Following Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Simmel (1986) insists that human species is a question that remains open without an end or limit: “man is still a path and a bridge” (p. 175). This is one of the most important aspects of Simmel’s reading: Nietzsche’s concept of disciplined life, which is “always richer in responsibility” (Simmel, 1992a: 123), will prove particularly relevant for Simmel’s vitalist ethics.

*Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* ends with Simmel’s typical move to “enliven” the contrasting perspectives of the two philosophers (Pyyhtinen, 2010: 63), as he puts forward a conception of an expansive self which “enjoys the embrace” of both “the desperation and jubilation of life as the poles of its own expansion, its own power, its own plenitude of forms” (Simmel, 1986: 181). Most readers and critics agree that Nietzschean cheerfulness seems to win over Schopenhauer’s pessimism in this passage (Frisby, 1987: 907; Pyyhtinen, 2010: 53), which is apparent both in the way Simmel frames his conclusion – as an existential, life-philosophical imperative which eludes “a logical understanding” – and in a more substantive sense. Following Simmel’s reworking of the Nietzschean doctrine of the *will to power*, the very dualism of desperation and jubilation can be perhaps understood as a “more-life,” which ascends through the experiences of “pain, oppression and sacrifice” (Simmel, 1986: 166). The emerging conception of an expansive self, bounded through the relation of self-responsibility, throws us directly into *The View of Life*, in which this self-relation emerges as the very nexus of modern ethics.

### ***The View of Life: Beyond Nietzsche and Kant?***

Although *The View of Life* contains only three direct references to Nietzsche, various scholars draw attention to numerous, if implicit, Nietzschean resonances throughout the book, such as Simmel’s appeal to strength (Vandenbergh, 2010: 22), his vision of sovereign personality (Lee and Silver, 2012: 133) and life’s self-transcendent and ultimately tragic structure (Button, 2012: 153; Pyyhtinen, 2010: 53). Lash (2006: 325) offers a thoroughly Nietzschean reading of Simmel’s sociological vitalism, in which Nietzsche’s slave moralities become “social forms.” Such interpretation risks obscuring

important nuances in Simmel's sharp critique, but, as Kron (2001: 115) argues, the very dualism of life and form framing Simmel's work certainly resonates with the Nietzschean distinction between the Dionysian and Apollonian. The interplay of life and form emerging from *The View of Life* also unfolds under the sign of tension, where any genuine unity – found briefly in diverse socio-cultural forms – ultimately dissolves. Seen from a vitalist standpoint of life's floating current, nothing can be perhaps ever experienced as living if it does not contain a promise of something transcending life. Simmel's last work, in particular its fourth chapter *The Law of The Individual*, can be then understood as an attempt to formulate a new vitalist ethics of the self, or at least a new vocabulary, which would allow to make a "linkage between individuality and lawfulness" (Simmel, 2010: 154) in an increasingly fragmented modern world, in which life and values themselves are in constant flux.

In the context of Simmel's intellectual biography, *The View of Life* has been read as the culmination of his lifelong philosophical oscillating between Nietzsche, Goethe, and Kant (Joas, 2000: 77). The specific ways in which *The Law of The Individual* unfolds as a polemic with Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* have been widely analysed (see Ferrara, 1998: 62–69; Lee and Silver, 2012; Levine, 2012; Lotter, 2000), but the Nietzschean overtone remains enigmatic, largely due to the methodological challenges that arise given Simmel's tendency not to reveal his sources. This tendency has led to somewhat generic and overstated accounts of the proximity between Simmel and Nietzsche (see Kron, 2001; Lash, 2005), and speculations about the very origin of the phrase "individual law" (*ein individuelles Gesetz*) as supposedly taken from Nietzsche's writings – either *Genealogy of Morals* or his late and controversial notebooks *Nachlass*, which have been published in English as *The Will to Power* (Steinmann, 2008: 214). Beyond such conjectures, it is unclear what are the precise ways in which Simmel's life-philosophy is indebted to Nietzsche. The aim of this section is to bring *The View of Life* closer to Simmel's previous critique, departing from an in-depth contextualization of Simmel's three direct references to Nietzsche in his last work, which will ultimately point us towards broader resonances across *The View of Life* and *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*.

In *The View of Life*, Simmel's (2010) primary move is to dissolve Kant's dualism alongside the framework of immanent life: the fundamental opposition between "life's actuality and its Ought" is drawn only to be submerged under the "continuous and continually changing life-stream" (p. 137). The emerging synthesis of "more-life" and "more-than-life" converges towards a flux in which all social, cultural, and spiritual forms continuously dissolve. In philosophical terms, Simmel integrates here the doctrines of being and becoming, bridging the gap he previously found in Bergson's philosophy, which viewed form as inherently antagonistic to life (see Levine, 2012: 40; Pyyhtinen, 2010: 58–59). Simmel (2010) refers to Nietzsche for the first time precisely in the context of this gap, drawing on the doctrine of the *will to power* in a way which follows from his previous reading, with an emphasis on "individuality" which is "circumscribed by form" (p. 13). In doing so, he brings into focus the individualized, creative dimension involved in the process of mastering and negotiating social forms, rather than any physical expressions of power.

Contextualizing Simmel's reworking of the doctrine of the *will to power* brings us to the broader question about the rich set of intellectual traditions that find expression in *The View of Life*. Apart from Kant, French vitalism in particular has played an important role in the sharpening of Simmel's philosophical standpoint. Various scholars have reconstructed the significance of this encounter drawing on Simmel's essays on Bergson, in which Simmel rejects Bergson's concept of flux that is directly graspable through the method of intuition, but still endorses his vitalist understanding of life beyond the activity of the will, as something cosmic and absolute (see Fitzi, 2002; Pyyhtinen, 2010: 53–54). In this sense, Simmel's life-philosophy surely opens up beyond the anthropocentric limit, but it is revealing that the Nietzschean doctrine of the *will to power* facilitates a link between the life-form dualism and *ethical individuality*, rather than the broader metaphysics of nature. Bridging between individuality and the concept of life is of decisive importance for Simmel's (1986) ethics as he insists that "the imperative that stands opposed to life seems unable to be 'vital'" (p. 107) and thus bind the sovereign, modern individual to "moral" action through the demand of the very self-

relation, rather than some abstract ideals. This is the context in which we find the second reference to Nietzsche:

Even Nietzsche gave it life alone for content, to be sure, but the ideal form of the Ought still remained the “tablet” that is placed “above life.” It is still a question (not posed by Nietzsche himself) whether the Ought, vital in its form, could be an analog of life or a category under which life becomes aware of itself.

(Simmel, 2010: 107)

This passage makes clear that Nietzsche’s account of life-affirmation surely provides a point of departure for Simmel’s own framework of “the individual law”. Yet Simmel seems to complicate his previous critique of Nietzsche with his suggestion that Nietzsche as an “(im)moralist” was to some extent still dependent on the opposition between life and its ought-to in trying to remove “the meaning-giving goal of life from its illusory position outside of life,” as he described it back in *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (Simmel, 1986: 6). Simmel makes a similar point in his article on Nietzsche from 1911 where he conceptualized Nietzschean ethics as a “third way” beyond Kant and Christianity, one in which “life itself” becomes a new “tablet” (Simmel, 2001: 171). In the passage above, Simmel seems to rehearse this argument, yet there is a crucial (if slightly surprising) twist, as his aim now is to dramatize his *break* with Nietzsche.

Unlike Nietzsche, Simmel is not so much interested in rejecting the “ought” – or universalizing it in a Kantian fashion – as in formulating yet another “third way,” in which the “ought” would advance as a part of life. At first, one might conclude that this is a rhetorical move rather than a substantive argument, especially that Simmel previously embraced the Nietzschean “challenge to create a new law” in which life itself would be infused with “a new, positive, and relentlessly demanding ‘ought’” (Simmel, 1986: 160). But assuming that Simmel is well aware of the difference between him and Nietzsche (Joas, 2000: 82), and that understanding this difference on his own terms might reveal important nuances in his broader project, it is important to ask why would he only hint at such a commitment, and perhaps even exaggerate his distance from Nietzsche.

The third (and last) reference to Nietzsche brings us closer to a plausible answer. *The View of Life* ends with an ambitious reworking of the doctrine of *eternal return*. For Simmel, the question is no longer whether life’s contradictions and tensions should be infinitely reaffirmed, but how to overcome the contingency of the moral claim upon the individual in the context of multiple points in one’s life-narrative:

Instead of the truly bleak Nietzschean thought – “Can you desire that this action of yours recurs infinitely often?” – I propose: “Can you desire that this action of yours should define your entire life?” For the fact that it does so is not even a question, once the tearing of life into discontinuous “acts” is given up.

(Simmel, 2010: 151)

This is a crucial point in which the self-relation itself becomes pervasively moralized, but what is at stake in Simmel’s distinction between desiring an act to be repeated infinitely versus defining your entire life? At first, it might appear as a classical dichotomy of “essence versus accident” in the formulation of identity, but considering the relational character of Simmel’s thought (see Pyyhtinen, 2010: 46–49), it is difficult to imagine that he would insist on some notion of a fundamental essence or truth. Placing the distinction in the broader framework of the “individual law” reveals significant nuances in Simmel’s rephrasing. Arguably, Simmel’s point is to dramatize the break with Kant’s reductionist understanding of moral duty which takes classes of isolated actions as its object.

According to the “individual law,” acts and decisions cannot be evaluated according to any external and normative criteria which would be detached from the contexts of our own lives. The

argument rests on a relativistic understanding of truth as situated, temporal, and individualized: “whether something is valid as truth for us depends on the entire complex of principles, methods, and experimental contents known by us at that moment” (Simmel, 2010: 151). In other words, each moment is comprehensible only from within one’s life, not from the perspective of the third observer. The division of time into discrete moments is important here, as this is precisely where the difference between the past and future arises.

This difference is anything but final: in the horizon of lived temporality, truth is intrinsically alive and unstable.<sup>5</sup> As Simmel (2010) puts it, “every recognized truth alters the conditions by which it itself is recognized as truth” (p. 152). With such radical understanding, Simmel’s notion of the self moves beyond the classical “essence versus accident” dichotomy – one action can define an *entire* life in infinitely many ways, as it can be narrated from potentially contradictory perspectives, depending on the constellation of life’s events on the floating matrix of life. Eternity, as in Simmel’s reading of the Nietzschean doctrine, is not conceived as a refutation of time and becoming, but as a unity of becoming and passing – a bridge between the “infinity of becoming” and “finitude of being” (Simmel, 1986: 175).

Contextualizing the distinction in this way shows that Simmel might have conceived of the Nietzschean doctrine as profoundly unsettling – to the extent that it brings back the burden and pain of the past – but it still lends itself to vitalist ethics. The arising question here is about the significance of Simmel’s rephrasing in the context of his critique of disinterested Kantian morality. Considering the interpretative tendency to place the “individual law” in the broader ‘Simmel and Nietzsche against Kant’ trajectory, it is hardly surprising that some argue for reading Simmel’s reworking as nothing less than a reversal of Kant’s categorical imperative (Steinmann, 2008: 215). This kind of interpretation is intuitive and plausible given Nietzsche’s famous rejection of the Kantian notions of virtue, duty, and the categorical imperative. Simmel himself quotes one of the most notorious passages from the *Antichrist* where Nietzsche dismissively refers to Kant as “the Chinese spirit of Königsberg” (Simmel, 1992b: 147). Yet Simmel’s comparative article *Nietzsche und Kant* (1906), which explores subtle proximities between the philosophers, complicates this thesis in several ways.

To be sure, Simmel is one of the few thinkers who examine the affinity between Nietzsche and Kant and in doing so, he remains attentive to the vast gap between them: Nietzsche’s “immanent” method and “intensely personal” thinking, Simmel (1993) argues, are “irreconcilable” with Kant’s transcendental orientation – particularly given Nietzsche’s call for reevaluation of all values (p. 21).<sup>6</sup> Yet, he still insists that Nietzsche’s project can be understood as a radical transformation of Kant’s critique insofar as their philosophies are “comparable in their moral dimension,” the difference being that “while Kant’s quest is to formulate the existing morality, Nietzsche [...] aims to give it a new meaning” (Simmel, 1993: 18). For Simmel (1986), this is sharply illustrated in the doctrine of *eternal return*: like Kant’s categorical imperative, the Nietzschean doctrine involves the “endless repetition of action,” which comes to serve as the moral criteria (p. 170). The difference lies in the direction of the repetition – action gains moral worth either as it is generalized onto society, or affirmed from within the life of the individual. Ultimately, both Kant and Nietzsche have the same “goal” (Simmel, 1993: 19), that is to overcome the contingency of values: nothing is to be willed “only-once,” but it is to be willed forever.

Furthermore, Simmel draws analogies in their theories of value as a function of self-sacrifice. Just as Kant grounds morality in the “overcoming of the lower and sensuous parts of our essence”, so does Nietzsche appeal to the extraordinary individual who masters his drives and passions towards the “elevation of humanity” (Simmel, 1986: 166). In this sense, Simmel (1986) concludes, “Nietzsche transforms Kant’s basic sentiment from an individual morality into an ethics of the species” (p. 166). This might be one of the most controversial moments in Simmel’s interpretation – particularly for those who insist that the Kantian notion of the split self is at odds with the Nietzschean affirmation of the embodied subject – but it is important to place Simmel’s argument in the broader context of his evolving views on society, individuality, and humanity.<sup>7</sup> In his essay *Kant und der Individualismus*, Simmel (1995a) argues that Nietzsche’s account of the self in its emphasis on individual uniqueness, heroism and incomparability might have originally developed in “sharp contrast to Kant,” but

ultimately, Nietzsche takes the Kantian argument on self-mastery “one step further” (pp. 281–282). This is because the Nietzschean distinction between the conflicting vantage points of humanity and society is a “second solution” to the classical problem of freedom, which Kant overrides with his conception of the transcendental ego that must be freed from all social bonds (Simmel, 1995a: pp. 280-282). In this sense, Nietzsche offers a promising radicalization of Kantian ethics with his ideals of self-mastery, nobility of mind and moral differentiation among individuals. Ultimately, Simmel (1964) goes as far as to argue that “Kant’s position was expanded, or conceived more profoundly, by Nietzsche” (p. 63).

Leaving aside the question if Simmel’s line of argumentation can be defended, and if Nietzsche can (and should) be understood on Kantian terms, this analysis suggests a more nuanced web of ideas that connects Kant and Nietzsche, as seen from a distinctively Simmelian perspective. For Simmel, Nietzsche is to some extent still dependent on Kant insofar as the point of reference for his ethics is the moral quality of individual action, rather than the person as a whole (Joas, 2000: 82). This brings us to a slightly provocative yet plausible explanation why Nietzsche – as a “moralist” like Kant (Simmel, 1993a: 18) – remains largely hidden in *The View of Life*. Ironically, Simmel might have been downplaying his intellectual debt to Nietzsche in order to dramatize his break with Kant. Ultimately, Nietzsche’s philosophy proves more helpful as a set of existential imperatives, which allow to recast the questions of substantive ethics under the light of the inner experience, than as a point of departure for challenging the Kantian legacy. Following this line of interpretation, we can finally consider the ways in which Simmel’s late thought might possibly bear a largely implicit Nietzschean imprint beyond the passages discussed above.

One of the most striking resonances across *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* and *The View of Life* is the overarching metaphor of self-overcoming. In the opening chapter of *The View of Life*, Simmel (2010) proclaims that the central “task of the moral individual” is “to overcome himself” (p. 5), drawing perhaps on his previous interpretation of the Nietzschean doctrine of the *Übermensch*: “as long as man is a being who can evolve, the task that is inherent to the concept of the overman can never be definitively fulfilled” (Simmel, 1986: 175). This metaphor underscores Simmel’s open-ended understanding of subjectivity which unfolds “in a wholly fluid, intuitive way” (2010: 107) as a function of lived unification: “actions mostly occur as something internally integrated, something deeply emergent” (2010: 108). In this sense, the “individual law” is better understood as a self-organizing form, elusive in its totality, rather than as an end product of some intentional and purposive acts of valuation. The Nietzschean concept of self-responsibility that “springs from the depth of one’s own being” (Simmel, 1986: 170) finds its subtle expression in Simmel’s ideal: sovereign individuality unfolds with “the rhythm in which life pours forth from its deepest wellspring” (Simmel, 2010: 109).

Problematizing the classical link between will and action in this way rests on an open-ended concept of evolution. In *The View of Life*, evolution is understood not “narrowly to imply the apparent necessity of a definable evolutionary goal” but as an “immanent quality of [...] the process, independent of any goal” (Simmel, 2010: 110). This resonates clearly with Simmel’s previous interpretation of Nietzsche’s mature thought, in which evolution “is not determined by its final goal” (Simmel, 1986: 7). In this sense, engaging with Nietzsche (among others) allows Simmel to move beyond the neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory of value towards creative evolutionism (see Lash, 2006: 5). This kind of emancipation from purposiveness has important implications for the “individual law” as Simmel (2010) seems to be rehearsing some of the Nietzschean suspicions against rationalized accounts of the self: the “forward-striving direction of life”, he argues, cannot be translated into static practices of the self which would turn the “perfection of true personality” into an end-goal (p. 150).

In this sense, Simmel’s life-philosophy eludes the socio-psychological discourse of self-improvement, not least because of the tensions inherent in the notion of an “ideal self:” the individual law unfolds with “ceaselessly changing often perhaps logically mutually contradictory actions” (Simmel, 2010: 138). Moreover, Simmel (2010) seems to be sceptical of the very notion of intentionality, which is evident in his reworking of the doctrine of the *will to power* understood as the creative flow of life which “rinses out of itself to a certain intensity of will and application of

power” (p. 112). Seen via a life-philosophical lens, Simmel’s Nietzsche transposes the transcendental Kantian “ought” onto the floating matrix of life, and posits a subject who is no longer self-identical, breaking with the classical view of the reason-centred commanding will.

The central problem of Simmel’s life-philosophy is then how to reconcile this flow of life, in which all provisional forms are ultimately compromised, with a search for a binding yet flexible self-narrative – or more broadly, an affirmative relation to one’s own finitude. This ambiguity lies at the heart of Simmel’s (2010) figure of a “completely moral person:” living through various momentarily enacted forms “in the endless variability and unpredictability of life itself,” he tends “not to ask whether each of these instants belongs under a law formed beyond himself” (p. 109). In the background, there is again the shadow of the *Übermensch* who “doesn’t think much of ‘callings’, the reason being he knows himself called, [...] he gives no thought whatsoever to being ‘finished and ready’” (Nietzsche, 1990: 75). Distinguishing between two modes of being, Simmel (2010) draws on the concept of the nobility of mind: “entire coherence of life is different for a person who is moral (and not only does the moral thing) than for the person who is otherwise qualified” (p. 109). This brings us back to the question about the meaning and significance of narrative coherence in the context of Simmel’s radical understanding of truth and lived temporality.

Simmel’s insistence on “unitary” throughout *The View of Life* might at first seem at odds with the Nietzschean multiplicity of forms, particularly in the postmodern reading which celebrates decentred pluralism as one of Nietzsche’s insights (see Gemes, 2001). One does not need to get ahead of Simmel and seek refuge in Deleuze or Derrida to clarify this point – there are traces of the Nietzschean suspicion against a unitary voice in Simmel’s (1992a) own interpretation of the figure of the philosopher, whose courage to live without a sense of resolution in the “dangerous proximity of the *Übermensch*” he clearly admires (p. 129), and perhaps even projects into his own understanding of Christianity as a site of struggle. This image suggests significant nuances in Simmel’s conception of unity: much less than a total reconciliation of life’s tensions, it is a constantly deferred axis from which unification can potentially take place.

What is at stake here is neither the aesthetic ideal of unity nor even the concept of autonomy that emerges out of the (violent) sublimation of one’s conflicting drives, but the broader problem of self-mastery which comes from within: sovereign individuality involves “the unity and wholeness that is experienced consistently through all of the multiplicity or particular acts, or more exactly, that lives *as this multiplicity*” (Simmel, 2010: 130). In this sense, Simmel is not so much interested in disrupting the notion of a unified self, but in a mode of vital self-affirmation that involves a variety of influences, contradictory beliefs, and perhaps even irreconcilable instincts. Narrative coherence, which distinguishes the moral individual from the “crowd,” Simmel (2010) argues, does not preclude taking on “a particular inner attitude in one epoch of his life, and an utterly divergent one in another – and so on in infinite possible variants” (p. 133). While the claim upon the individual might be differentiated over the course of her or his lifetime – “subject to development, evolution, change” (Simmel, 2010: 110) – it is lived through in a profoundly continuous manner, as if life was never subordinate to an object or goal that would exceed it.

Ultimately, the resonances across *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* and *The View of Life* bring into sharper focus the “creative aspect of the ethical realm” (Simmel, 2010: 152) which opens up with the attempt to ground moral value in the life process. Reading Nietzsche in a way that emphasizes his Kantianism, Simmel underscores the conception of man as a creative and sovereign knowing and acting subject, but he follows Nietzsche in recognizing finitude as the necessary precondition for the genesis of values. With his reworking of the doctrine of the *eternal return*, Simmel reconsiders on his own terms the various ways in which an individual’s relation to her own temporality becomes pervasively moralized: expansive life “makes not only the act but also the Ought of every moment into the heir and bearer of responsibility of all that we have ever been, done, and been obliged to” (Simmel, 2010: 154). The difference between the past and future here is anything but final, as each moment, understood as a brief unity of passing and becoming, calls for its transcendence. This makes evident “the difficulties of ethical choice” (Simmel, 2010: 152), which has to be constantly relived in changing social contexts, without recourse to duty, God(s),

and moral constants. In this sense, the open-ended character of the “individual law” points us towards the new possibilities for affirmation that open up with the stark realization that the subject is no longer dependent on a singular truth.

### **Conclusion: Sociological implications**

The encounter between Nietzsche and Simmel surely testifies to the impossibility of conceiving of the subject as the nexus of ethics in transcendental and ahistorical terms, but it is less clear what is at stake here in terms of Simmel’s social theory. This is the focus of the last section, which considers the broader significance of Simmel’s engagement with Nietzsche following the integrative line of critique which attempts to reconcile between the philosophical and sociological polarities in Simmel’s thought (Kemple, 2007; Lash, 2005; Lee and Silver, 2012). The aim is not to suggest an entirely new direction for future inquiry, but to place Simmel’s critique alongside his writings on society, war, aesthetics, and ethics, in order to think through the framework of life in relation to the social.

Despite the recent vitalist turn in Simmel scholarship, the connection between Simmel’s social and moral theory remains ambiguous, and perhaps all the more significant considering the tendency to celebrate either form or life at each other’s expense (Levine, 2012: 7; Swedberg and Reich, 2010: 31). In this context, Simmel’s engagement with Nietzsche is revealing in several ways, not least because it allows us to read more continuity into his socio-metaphysical project. For Simmel, both as a philosopher of life and a sociologist of form, the structures of human existence are nothing but static. Indeed, his understanding of the relationship between the self, society, and humanity in *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* foreshadows the ways in which dynamism associated with the concept of sociation will be later transposed onto the vitalist vocabulary:

In reality “society” is but one of these forms through which humanity plays out its power, its vital contents, and its interests, and it could do the same thing through the forms of individual existence, objective spiritual contents, “natural” existence, and the relations between religious and metaphysical fundaments.

(Simmel, 1986: 144).

*The View of Life* can be perhaps read as this kind of thought experiment, in which the premises of Simmel’s sociology become reversed, as the focus of his inquiry shifts from the social to those forms of individual existence which can be expressed in vitalist terms alongside the life-form dualism. Simmel’s last work might then seem far from social theory as traditionally defined, but it nevertheless points towards fruitful connections and tensions which underpin his broader socio-philosophical project.

Some of these tensions have been recently explored under the framework of “sociological metaphysics” understood as an “idiom of thinking in Simmel’s work encompassing core ideas and basic problems central to the modernist project of critical reflexive knowledge about the social conditions of human existence” (Harrington and Kemple, 2012: 10). In this vein, we can read Simmel’s critique of Nietzsche as one of the sites where Simmel explores his longstanding interest in the dynamics of individual experience and ethical agency in an increasingly fragmented modern culture. As David Frisby (1987: 907) argues, the Nietzschean distinction between the vantage points of humanity and society clearly resonates with Simmel’s famous essay *How is Society Possible?* which problematizes the relationship between the self and society as unthinkable without each other: “what kind a person’s socialized being is, is determined or co-determined by the kind of one’s unsocialized being” (Simmel, 2009: 45). Lee and Silver (2012: 137) argue that the self-relation emerging from *The View of Life* can be incorporated into the framework of formal sociology precisely via Simmel’s discussion of the second a priori in *How is Society Possible?*. This is where we encounter one of the ontological conditions that make the society possible: life which is not entirely social, unique being-for-itself, a distinct “I.”

In his moral theory, Simmel elevates this aspect of life to the very precondition for ethics: if one apprehends the ego “in the inner uniqueness or solitude in which it is experienced,” Simmel (2010: 115) argues, “then morality itself originates from the point where the person is alone with himself.” At the first glance one might conclude that this is an antithesis to the classical view in social theory, which underscores the moral superiority of the society over the individual. Simmel surely breaks with this tradition, but crucially, not to replace the concept of the society with that of the individual and thus fall into the trap of dualistic thinking.<sup>8</sup> This brings us to one of the most striking aspects of Simmel’s broader project, which can be neither grasped in terms proposed by symbolic interactionists (such as Cooley and Mead), who view the self as socially constructed, nor in terms of the zero-sum relationship between the individual and society. Simmel’s life-philosophical perspective on subjectivity can be best understood in contrast to Durkheim’s conception of *homo duplex* in which the social and the individual function as antagonistic forces (see Pyyhtinen, 2008: 282–295; 2010: 140–144). Unlike Durkheim, Simmel conceives of the self as unified rather than internally divided, both in his discussion of the second and third a priori in *How is Society Possible?* and in *The View of Life*, where he insists on conceptualizing the individual as a “living unity” (Simmel, 2010: 147), a synthesis via which various dualities - being and becoming, mind and body, life and form - continuously dissolve.

Contextualizing Simmel’s views on the subject as a locus of morality reveals a more subtle account of ethical individualism, one which transcends both the *quantitative* and *qualitative* forms that individualism took in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (see Pyyhtinen, 2008). Indeed, insisting on the “double incomparability” of the individual, Simmel (2010) puts forward a positive concept of the self: “only when we cease being a mere product and cross point of external forces and become a being that develops out of his own ego, can we be *responsible*” (p. 147). Simmel rejects here the Kantian *quantitative* understanding in which the transcendental subject is nothing but an abstraction of social ties because it fails to capture the sense in which individuals experience moral demands precisely when they recognize themselves as ethical subjects beyond social norms. Yet he simultaneously moves beyond the romantic myth of the self-enclosed individual whose only aim is the egocentric cultivation of originality: “the concept of the individual law requires the most decisive statement that the sense of individuality which first presents itself – being-other and being-special, the qualitative incomparability of the particular, is *not* in question here” (Simmel, 2010: 147). One of the most striking claims Simmel (2010) makes in this context is that individual uniqueness cannot be conceived in terms of “difference [...] from what is shared with other individuals” (p. 147). The dangers implicit in such idea are exemplified in the ways in which the German youth distorted the Nietzschean philosophy as a simple formula “to be otherwise” (Simmel, 1994: 14).

Simmel’s own critical engagement with Nietzsche’s ideals of humanity, evolution, and nobility of mind paves the way towards a more nuanced understanding of ethical individualism beyond the classical opposition of social structure and individual personality. According to Kron (2001), the “individual law” should be understood as nothing less than a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative forms of individualism, which draws out sociological implications from Nietzsche’s moral philosophy. Considering the ambivalent role of Kant, this is perhaps a slightly reductive reading, but Simmel’s reworking of the doctrines of the *eternal return* and the *will to power* surely hints at the various ways in which the flux of life produces both sociality and individuality.

In this respect, Simmel’s life-philosophy reverberates with tensions that underpin his arguments on the third a priori, conceptually perfect society and “sociological metaphysics” in *Soziologie*. This is where Simmel has famously suggested a counterintuitive link: the diversity of social elements ensures the unique position of the individual within the society. In other words, the ontological unity of the society presumes an unattainable ideal of a pervasive harmony between the individual and society, as illustrated in the notion of a vocation underwriting the modern division of labour: “a position-and-performance in society for each person, to which one is called, and an imperative to search for it” (Simmel, 2009: 51).<sup>9</sup> While the third a priori, in its original formulation, has a regulative rather than ethical function – insofar as the perfect harmony is constantly deferred – a reading of

Simmel's life-philosophy via a Nietzschean lens helps to articulate what the "unique position" of the individual might potentially entail in socio-metaphysical terms.

For Simmel's life-philosophical conception of individuality invokes a parallel image of an unattainable axis. The difference lies in the distance from the subject: the conceptual axis towards which all individual activities converge in the conceptually perfect society is now brought to the life-process itself. In elevating life itself to the status of the absolute, Simmel uncovers how life's details converge towards a unified yet elusive totality, and begins to problematize the question of self-knowledge as one which cannot be answered without questioning the distinction between the object of knowledge and the subject of experience. In this sense, subjectivity can be neither understood in terms of essential or relational difference under the conditions of social differentiation nor via the solipsistic view of the self as self-enclosed, unique and singular. The non-socialized dimension of life, irreducible to any generic form and unthinkable in itself, emerges as the very ethical precondition of the society.

In *The View of Life*, the category of social (inter)action might be then obscured (Joas, 2000: 83), but this is perhaps the point, if ethical agency is to unfold *alongside* rather than in opposition to the society: the "ought" appears simultaneously individualized and historically contingent – "determined in each case historically and psychologically" (Simmel, 2010: 102).<sup>10</sup> Simmel (2010) illustrates the interweaving of the personal and the social with the example of an antimilitarist who is ethically obliged to perform his military duty, although his "subjective moral consciousness condemns it" (p. 143). The social is hardly neglected here: "individuality that lives in the form of the Ought is not something ahistorical, nonmaterial, or only consisting of so-called character" (Simmel, 2010: 143). Placing this passage in the context of Simmel's war writings, which explore the coming together of individuality and society, helps to clarify what is at stake here. In the absolute situation of war, the military duty is no longer externally imposed by the state but turns into a moral imperative that comes from within, as the individual recovers a sense of belonging to the broader socio-cultural totality (Simmel, 2007). The First World War should be then understood in proto-existentialist terms, as a call for individual responsibility, a chance for Germans to actualize their "true" (i.e. historically contingent) potential alongside the maxim "Become What You Are" (Simmel, 2007). Reworking Nietzsche's dictum as a reminder of an ethical duty to embrace the test of national belonging comes dangerously close to war propaganda packaged as moral philosophy, but, more importantly, it also points towards broader resonances between *The View of Life* and Simmel's writings on Germany and the Great War.

The Nietzschean problem of living historically is central in this context (see Watier, 1994: 281), although Simmel presumably downplays Nietzsche's scepticism about its viability in a decadent culture in which life itself is inevitably impoverished (see Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993: 174–176). For Simmel, the direction of history under the impact of war is no longer towards life's disintegration, as man is called into responsibility for the whole. In other words, war transforms life into an affirmative experience in which acts of individual courage, self-sacrifice, and creativity emerge as the very precondition for society, or at least as ways of advancing humanity. If this is the most authentic moment in the life of an antimilitarist, then the subject proves to be nothing without history. In this sense, the absolute situation of war exemplifies the ways in which integrative cultural, social, and political forms create individual personalities that are no longer disjointed, when the boundaries between morals and life, self and society, and subjective and objective value ultimately dissolve. Simmel's ideal of an individual who is perfectly integrated into the social whole should be then understood not only as a neo-Kantian fiction that secures the ontological unity of society, nor even as an aesthetic ideal of unity, but as an ethical imperative in a broadly Nietzschean vein that takes us beyond the opposition between individuality and normativity (society).

This is where we encounter the limit edge of Simmel's life-philosophy: with his ideal of a synthesis, Simmel does not even consider the broader problem of locating the individual in a morally irrational whole, nor does he seem to think that the authority of the state or that the direction of society might (or should) be put into question. This is perhaps an effect of the gap between Simmel's social and moral thought, or of the broader separation of sociology and philosophy as academic disciplines, but

it suggests an interesting direction for future comparative inquiry, as the question of political authority in an ethically irrational world finds a more sustained treatment in Weber's reading of Nietzsche (see Shaw, 2014). Moving on to the twentieth century, Simmel's insights foreshadow the ways in which concerns around the epistemic location of the synthesizing subject, the biosocial limits of life, and the production of ethical agency in the context of multiple (regimes of) truths will haunt contemporary thinkers, most famously exemplified in the works of Michel Foucault.

Simmel's Nietzsche opens up a critical but elusive space in classical sociology, perhaps the blind spot in our field of vision, as we enter the terrain of ethical individualism that breaks with the institutional, structural, and normative foundations of morality. In this matrix of ideas, society is anything but morally superior to the individual, yet both terms should be radically revised given the metaphysical privilege of the immanent life-force over the commanding will. In this sense, recognizing the Nietzschean debt complicates contemporary reconstructions of Simmel's ethics of relational individuality, as Simmel's radical understanding of truth is inconsistent with rationalized and static accounts of the self. Similarly, there are various tensions that open up with the attempt to think through the intelligibility of the self-relation through the framework of sociological vitalism. Seen via Simmel's Nietzschean lens, the life-force fuels ethical individualism rather than post-human politics of the flux. This is not to argue that the vitalist readings are less relevant, but to underscore the importance of some fundamental questions about the relations between the self, social order, and human values that lie at the heart of Simmel's engagement with Nietzsche.

The resonances across *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* and *The View of Life* suggest that there is a lot classical sociology can gain from a more sustained dialogue with philosophy, at least if we follow Simmel's life-philosophical insights that transgress the naturalized boundaries between social ontology, epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. Despite the recent calls for reconsidering the relationship between classical sociology and social philosophy (see Ferrara, 1998: 61; Pyyhtinen, 2008: 296), there is still a vast gap between them, as evidenced in the contemporary scholarship on Simmel who considered himself a philosopher, yet gets attention only from sociologists. Perhaps a good starting point for rethinking this relationship is Simmel's (1964) notion of *philosophical sociology* which he began to formulate in 1917 with a set of open-ended questions:

Is society the purpose of human existence, or is it a means for the individual? Does the ultimate value of social development lie in the unfolding of personality or of association? Do meaning and purpose inhere in social phenomena at all, or exclusively in individuals?

(p. 24)

We might be tempted to dismiss these questions as obsolete, but Simmel's encounter with Nietzsche signifies a promise of rephrasing them in productive and novel ways, as we inhabit a space on the edge of classical social thought.

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### **Notes**

1. Frisby (1987) offers the most comprehensive overview of Simmel's critical engagement with Nietzsche (missing only the 1911 article): "Simmel published articles on aspects of his life and work in 1895, 1896, 1897 (a defence of Nietzsche against Tönnies' attack), 1903, and 1906, as

well as lecturing on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche directly from 1901 onwards" (p. 906). These lectures offer material for further inquiry: see Weinstein and Weinstein (1993) for a Nietzschean reading of Simmel's lecture from 1904 "On the History of Philosophy" (pp. 171–185). This article involves quotes from all of the articles cited above, translated by the author.

2. Despite the primacy of negative responses to Nietzsche among Simmel's contemporaries (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993: 173), the reception of Nietzschean philosophy by early German sociologists is of course highly differentiated: see Solms-Laubach (2007) for detailed discussion.
3. See Rogers (2001) and Loeb (2010: 13–16) for a critical assessment of the argument that the doctrine of the eternal return is conceptually incoherent.
4. See Dodd (2012: 153) for a distinction between the absolute and relative kinds of equality, associated respectively with the aesthetically and conceptually perfect society.
5. Simmel's understanding of time in *The View of Life* resonates with the ways in which temporality, life, and death are conceptualized by Deleuze and Heidegger (see Darmon and Frade, 2012; Pyyhtinen, 2012).
6. See Hill (2003), Sokoloff (2006), and Rayman (2013) for contemporary discussions on the Kantian foundations of Nietzsche's thought, the question if Nietzsche arrived at some of his most characteristic doctrines in response to Kantian critiques and whether their views on action, morality, and degrees of self-mastery are in some ways compatible.
7. Simmel (2010) rejects the Kantian notion of the split self as "undemonstrated, naively dogmatic claim" which rests on a false assumption that the "rational, universally valid part of us is the 'true' I" (p. 107). Seen from Simmel's own standpoint of unified individuality, Kant posits a false dichotomy between the mind and the body by "tearing an individual apart into sensuousness and reason" (p. 106). Simmel insists that such dualism is deeply problematic insofar as it rationalizes, idealizes, and diminishes the lived experience.
8. Standard positivistic readings of Durkheim's theory of moral individualism, collective conscience, and organic solidarity illustrate the dangers inherent in conceiving of the society as a sacred source of morality – see Bowring (2016) for a critical assessment.
9. At the first glance we might conclude that Simmel offers here a similar view on the relationship between social differentiation and social cohesion as the one developed by Durkheim in *The Division of Labour in Society* with his notion of organic solidarity to the extent that the diversification of the society and individual personality are positively correlated for both thinkers. The parallel is viable in relation to Simmel's notion of *quantitative* individuality, but not if we consider that Durkheim conceives of the social and individual as antagonistic forces with his conception of *homo duplex* (Pyyhtinen, 2008: 295). While Durkheim's ethical individualism binds the individual to the collective, Simmel's "individual law" rejects moral obligation which comes from outside the agent.
10. Simmel (2010) refers to the Ought as a "categorical *Ur-phänomen*" to ground its objective character (p. 102). See Dodd (2008) for a critical discussion of the concept of *Ur-phänomen* in Simmel's broader project.

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### Author biography

Dominika Partyga is a doctoral student at the London School of Economics in the Department of Sociology. Her research explores the relationship between the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and contemporary social thought.