

# The Resilience of Life: On Simmel's Last Testament

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*The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms*, by **Georg Simmel**. Translated by John A. Y. Andrews and Donald Levine, with an introduction by Donald N. Levine and Daniel Silver. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010. 203pp. \$35.00 cloth ISBN: 978-0-226-757783-4.

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Theory

This book is the belated translation—more than ninety years after its publication in German immediately following his untimely death at the age of 60—of Georg Simmel's last “testament”: a wide-ranging intellectual meditation on “life” in its most general aspects. The publication of an English-language edition of a major work authored by one of the central figures in social theory today constitutes an event, and this translation effort (by John A. Y. Andrews and Donald Levine) certainly qualifies as such. The book is composed of three major thematic chapters headlined by an introductory statement of the fundamental problematic that serves as the ordering framework for each of the more detailed investigations. Donald Levine's exemplary introduction to the book does a fantastic job of dealing with the intellectual and more immediate “production” history of the book, so I will not devote any space to repeating that here. The volume closes with the first translation into English of a set of “aphorisms” written towards the end of his life headlined with an introduction by John Andrews.

Recent scholarship has exploded the received view of Simmel's work as primarily concerned with providing the methodological and intellectual foundations of sociology as a scientific discipline (narrowly conceived) or as an unfocused essayist mainly concerned with providing impressionistic portraits of different aspects of modern culture and experience. Instead, the “new” Simmel is revealed as a specifically philosophical thinker, whose various interventions—up to and including *The*

*Philosophy of Money*—can best be thought of as iterative attempts to grapple with a fundamental problematic of modern life: the “dialectic” of the objectification of dynamic vital impulses into static forms that seem to stand against the very impulses responsible for their production (as pithily stated in “The Tragedy of Culture” essay). This problematic, most clearly recognizable among other classical theorists in Marx’s thoughts on alienation and “estrangement” and in Weber’s influential portrait of the “spirit” of modern capitalism transforming itself into a “steel-hard casing”, is recast by Simmel in *The View of Life* as *the* fundamental problem across a wide range of fields, from Metaphysics, to Ethics, to the Philosophy of Biology, Epistemology, Aesthetics and yes even Social Theory.

This sort of ambition makes *The View of Life* a book like no other written by a classical social theorist. Marx, Durkheim and Weber all rejected or transcended philosophy *stricto sensu* in their unique ways. Here, Simmel returns to philosophical reflection proper in an attempt to develop a post-Nietzschean metaphilosophy that is simultaneously foundational (in its attempt to lay down some non-negotiable precepts) and anti-foundational (in its open-ended, radically unfinished character).

As the title indicates the basic category for Simmel is *life*, a notion that is used in a multivocal sense. It is clear however, that the sense in which Simmel uses this term throughout is inseparable from a consideration of what life is *not*; in its most naive formulation, life is not death (however insofar as death is simply a limit-boundary then—as Simmel argues in detail in chapter 3—death is not the opposite of life but is instead a presupposition of its continuity). Most importantly, life is not *form*. The core argument can thus be distilled as follows: Life is dynamic, continuous and bound to a temporal-evolutionary process. Form, on the other hand, while emerging out life is static, “eternal” (out of time) and in some cases can serve as a harness preventing the continuing transformation of life. If life is experience in its most immediate form, not-life is experience as filtered by a Kantian categorical grid; if life is the a-nomalous intermingling of contents and motivations in everyday existence then not-life is the lawful autonomization of those contents into self-legislating forms in delimited “worlds”; if life is the concrete understanding of what is the right thing to do for *me* in *this* situation, not-life is the abstract subjection to a categorical moral law that stands above me as an impersonal mandate across all possible settings.

The essence of life is thus—as Simmel argues in a groundbreaking attempt to marry Darwinism

to vitalism—to persevere in its continuity (life is always *more-life*). The continuity of life is however, a paradoxical sort, insofar as it is realized via its inscription in a field defined by limits and boundaries (here Simmel can be seen as a precursor of the “autopoetic” thesis in the Philosophy of Biology). Given its constitution via boundaries, the continuity of life can only be realized by a constant process of self-transcendence of the very limitations that define it, which results in the creation of objective forms that are “not-life.” Life is defined by limits and also by its constant tendency to overflow those limits. Thus, life is bound to canalize this vital effort in self-preservation into the regularities of forms (of which cognitive abstraction and the aesthetic objectification of sensibility are prototypical) which then stand to life as *more-than-life*.

This argument as laid out in the first chapter is intuitive and innovative. However, this is not to say that the rest of the book is easy going. The translators have done an excellent job of rendering Simmel’s prose in clear readable English. However, Simmel’s rejection of sub-sectioning and the sometimes meandering nature of his argumentation lend some sections of the book a rather amorphous feel, making getting through some of the more abstract portions of the work a rather arduous task. This applies in particular to the last two chapters, a problem that is compounded by the fact that subject matter at hand is very far away from social theory as traditionally defined: Chapter 3 is really a contribution to ontology and theology broadly conceived and chapter 4 is really a contribution to Kantian meta-ethics. Even chapter 2, which is the chapter that is most directly connected to classical themes in social theory, contains important contributions to debates in aesthetic theory (where Simmel argues for a formalist transcendence of the realist/conventionalist debate) and epistemology (where Simmel brazenly attempts to recast the pragmatist/realist debate in truth theory into his own vitalist-dialectic conception). This makes the book difficult to appraise as a whole; it will undoubtedly take a long time (and contributions from scholars across a wide range of disciplines and sub-specialties) to settle on the total extent of Simmel’s achievement here and to lay out its promise and limitations.

Since chapter 2 is the one that contains themes that most clearly address fundamental problems in social theory, I will close this review with a brief consideration of the argument laid down there. Simmel proposes an astonishing rethinking of the influential Weberian theme of the inevitable constitution of different spheres of value endowed with their own lawfulness (*eigengesetzlichkeit*) but devoid of an overarching meaning, as laid out with characteristic Weberian pathos in the so-

called “Intermediate Reflections” (*zwischenbetrachtungen*). What is significant is that Simmel is able to theorize the dialectic of autonomization and differentiation while avoiding the noncommittal nominalism and moral relativism of the Weberian position.

Simmel assimilates the problematic of differentiation into his conceptualization of the emergence transformation of more-life into more-than-life across various self-disclosing “worlds” (what today would be called “fields”): the cognitive (science), the aesthetic (art) and the religious (in addition to the realms of eroticism, law and the economy). The core argument here is that autonomy emerges from the emancipation of life from the inherent “purposiveness” of everyday (biological, psychological and social) existence. Simmel turns traditional action theory on its head by convincingly showing that purpose and goal oriented-action is not the feature of human behavior that guarantees “freedom,” as presumed for instance in Parsonian action theory (in fact purposive action is precisely what persons share with animals). Instead, it is the capacity to turn what what is usually a purpose into a “purposeless” goal in itself (a process distinct from the transformation of means into ends in themselves as analyzed in “The Psychology of Money” essay), that the self-transcending power of life is most evident.

Autonomization is the transcendence of the tyranny of teleological determination—whether this determination is by values does not make it any less constricting—via the constitution of ends that are “purposeless” and sometimes even “counter-hedonic” in the most strict sense. These non-purposive activities are apt to most clearly disclose their character as actually as freely chosen pursuits (a process distinct from the transformation of means into ends in themselves as analyzed in “The Psychology of Money” essay). A key part of Simmel’s argument is that autonomization entails a “rotation” or shift so that what was previously experienced as tied *to* life (e.g. knowing [in order to] live) becomes the primary purpose *of* life (e.g. living to know). Simmel sees this drive towards autonomization as both an irreversible process and—here is the difference with Weber or Adorno for that matter—as a precondition for the further development of life (although his description of the autonomization of the “economic” logic into an objective apparatus still shares a lot with Weber). Thus, the acknowledgment of differentiation and even incommensurability across worlds is not incompatible with a view that sees them as sharing a common vital foundation that makes up for their inherent limitations as partial ways to transcend the objectively given.