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Beneath and Beyond the Fragments: The Charms of Simmel's Philosophical Path for Contemporary Subjectivities

Journal:	<i>Theory Culture & Society</i>
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Key Words:	experience, Simmel, philosophy, life
Abstract:	<p>Our purpose in this paper is to explore the reasons for the continued attractiveness of Simmel's thought today, grounding it in contemporary affinities to his philosophical stance towards the world. We first seek to characterise Simmel's notion of the 'philosophical attitude', as it emerged from his quest for rendering 'reality' from within, unveiling its inner structure of meaning and reaching to its unity. We argue that Simmel ultimately grounded it in the philosopher's particularly developed disposition for <i>Erlebnis</i>, i.e. the unified, pre-theoretical, pre-conceptual experience of each moment of reality and life, and in a particular mode of objectivating this experience by conveying a sense of the whole. We provide an illustration of such an approach and its implications through his analysis of 'remoteness from oneself' and the restlessness it entails in the Philosophy of Money. We argue that Simmel's attempt at phenomenologically unveiling the contours and depths of life moments and fragments as well as his emphasis on constant movement provide contemporary subjectivities with a comforting feeling of reassurance. But Simmel's philosophical stance is also driven by a quasi-mystical longing (<i>Sehnsucht</i>) for unification with life which gives expression to the deeply felt yearning for the One that lies, both for postmodern subjectivities and for a major philosophical path that he opened up in the 20th century, beneath and beyond the fragments. This prompts us to offer an initial assessment of the main implications of such philosophical stance by relating it to the philosophical path that he opened up (Heidegger and his followers but also in part Deleuze) and by placing it in what we understand to be the new philosophical situation today.</p>

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For Peer Review

**Beneath and Beyond the Fragments: The Charms of Simmel's Philosophical Path
for Contemporary Subjectivities**

For Peer Review

Beneath and Beyond the Fragments: The Charms of Simmel's Philosophical Path for Contemporary Subjectivities

Abstract

Our purpose in this paper is to show that the reasons for the continued attractiveness of Simmel's thought today go beyond its post-modern appropriation and that they are in fact no different from what they have been, much more discreetly and even covertly, throughout the 20th century: an affinity to Simmel's underlying philosophical stance towards the world. We first seek to characterise Simmel's notion of the philosophical attitude, as it emerged from his quest, already present in his philosophy of history, for rendering 'reality' from within, unveiling its inner structure of meaning and reaching to its unity. We argue that Simmel ultimately grounded it in the philosopher's particularly developed disposition for *Erlebnis*, i.e. pre-theoretical, pre-conceptual lived experience, and in a particular mode of objectivating this experience by conveying a sense of the whole. Simmel's own *Philosophy of Money* already testified to this quest for the unveiling of meaning, for example when Simmel characterises the longing human being of the modern money economy through her/his restless movement, thus pointing beyond 'remoteness from oneself' to the possibility of 'reconciliation' with the movement of 'life' as such.

On this basis we connect Simmel's philosophical stance to a trend linking Bergson to Heidegger and in part to Deleuze in the attempt to develop a new mode of thinking going beneath and beyond purely conceptual thought, and we argue that this powerfully accounts for its contemporary appeal. But this philosophical trend is also marked by a not unrelated temptation to deny the multiplicity of being and to herald new versions of 'the One' (e.g. life). It is thus a current in which philosophy can (and does, in Simmel's case) come very close to religion, in particular to mysticism, and which accommodates a concomitant denial of the autonomy of politics. We argue that these too are attractive features for contemporary subjectivities but draw the attention to their compatibility with conformism and adaptation to the world.

3-7 Keywords

Experience, Life, Philosophy, Simmel

Introduction

For some time, revival of interest in Simmel's work seemed to be predicated upon its resonance with post-modern fear of 'grand narratives' and its professed delight in the fragmentary, the fleeting, the momentary. Yet, as knowledge of his work accrued, and as the edition of his complete works became available, interest widened to encompass the philosophical underpinnings of his essayist production, although only recently to the point of trying to come to terms with his thought as a whole. While the appropriation and use of particular aspects of Simmel's work has continued unabated, thus fulfilling his own prophecy about his intellectual legacy, we would like to argue that Simmel's charm goes much further and deeper than 'cold cash distributed among many heirs, each transforming his portion according to his nature' (Simmel, 2004a: 263). This article is meant as an exploration of the reasons for the discreet appeal of Simmel's stance toward the world today and also, in a largely unrecognised fashion, for his extraordinary influence in 20th century thought.

We first seek to characterise the philosophical attitude which Simmel advocated beyond all specific substantive philosophical concerns – with its grounding, as Rembrandt's art, in the objectivation of unified lived experience (*Erlebnis*), its horizon in a 'third realm', and its present in the finitude of existence. Simmel's treatment of alienation, or rather of 'remoteness from oneself' in the *Philosophy of Money* provides us with an illustration both of the depths of existential analysis to which such philosophical attitude was conducive and of the muting of all critical charges in the unveiling of a sort of harmony of permanent disequilibrium. This leads us to reflect more widely on the implications of a Simmelian stance toward the world – as it seems to us to have decisively contributed to opening up a major philosophical path in the 20th century – and on its impasses, particularly political ones. We conclude by placing such a stance and its contemporary bearing in relation to what we understand to be the new philosophical situation today.

1 – Simmel's path to a philosophical attitude: from 'science of reality' to philosophy and the 'totality of being'

For those inclined to see overall continuity in Simmel's work, it has become again customary to highlight the powerful and unifying theme of 'life' as guiding thread

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3 (Lash, 2005; Levine, 2008; Pyyhtinen, 2009). This is but a rediscovery, for in 1925,
4 Vladimir Jankélévitch had already unravelled and demonstrated the early, encompassing
5 and pervasive influence of Simmel's very specific notion of life on all his writings, and
6 indeed the fusion, in the last part of his life, between his aesthetics, his philosophy of
7 history and his philosophy of life (Jankélévitch, 1988)¹.
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12 Yet perhaps is it preferable not to take this path, at least not immediately, if we want, as
13 is our purpose in this paper, to assess Simmel's legacy from the perspective of the
14 stance towards the world that it affords. For the notion of life is all encompassing and
15 beyond all assessment. It seems to demand struggles, yet the status of these struggles is
16 unclear.
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21 Perhaps is it preferable, then, to go back to a notion that was always on the brink of
22 being absorbed by that of 'life', but which could also open up to completely different
23 paths: the notion of 'reality' (*Wirklichkeit*). For the 'real' and 'concrete' were what 19th
24 century German scholars, led by historians, had wanted to oppose to the 'abstract'
25 'teleological universal thought' associated with the ideals of the French Revolution
26 (Dilthey, 1883: XV-XVI; Troeltsch, 1922: 19). This stance, partly couched in national
27 terms, also translated onto the field of affirmation and struggle of the historical sciences
28 against the natural sciences and against the application of their abstraction to the
29 understanding of human processes, as positivism pretended to do. The 'concrete', the
30 'living', the 'singular' were emphasised by the historical (as well as the historicising)
31 sciences both as object of analysis and as goal (for the fostering of self-awareness –
32 *Selbstbesinnung* – and the construction of the personality in its singularity) (Hennis,
33 2000: 126; Hübinger, 1988).
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46 In this connection it is useful to remember that, in the controversies which presided over
47 the attempts to ground the 'human sciences' (Wilhelm Dilthey), 'the cultural sciences'
48 (Heinrich Rickert) or 'social and cultural' sciences (Max Weber) as such, Simmel was
49 one of the first contributors to characterise history as a 'science of reality'
50 (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*), and to assert the capacity of history to grasp the individual
51 and the concrete in opposition to nomological deduction in the natural sciences, or
52 indeed as a complement to the more formal and abstract approaches which he developed
53 in his own 'sociological and psychological investigations'²:
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'The law has an ideal character, no bridge leads from it to a graspable reality... Insofar as the
historical science has to represent what has really happened, since it is the science of reality

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3 by excellence, it enters in the strongest opposition that can be thought of against all science of
4 laws'(Simmel, 1989a: 348-349).

7 In Simmel's claim that history represents 'what has really happened', the 'really' has to
8 be understood as meaning 'in its whole concrete reality' and not in any positivist sense.
9 But what is this concrete reality and how is it to be fathomed?

13 Reality (*Wirklichkeit*), says Simmel, is the 'world given to us as sum of
14 fragments'(1996c: 32): the apprehension of reality is thus referred to the possibility of
15 unified grasp of the world and oneself, a possibility which Simmel, following Dilthey,
16 found in the 'synthesis of imagination' performed by the historian (1997: 274); in the
17 'totalising ability of the soul', particularly characterising philosophers (1996c: 17); and
18 which he ultimately grounded in the pre-theoretical, pre-conceptual 'response of our
19 total existence (*Gesamtexistenz*), drawn from much wider and very fundamental layers,
20 to the existence (*Dasein*) of things' (2000: 321-322), which is how Simmel came to
21 characterise *Erlebnis* (lived experience) in his last works. A science of reality thus seeks
22 to be more real than the real and elaborate and compose reality as unity 'from within',
23 as unity of meaning.
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33 Let us examine the historical attitude in Simmel's science of reality more closely. The
34 re-composition of reality demands its compression, condensation, re-expansion in
35 images of the world or of concrete figures: in that sense, the elaboration of reality
36 demanded from the historian does not differ from artistic elaboration. Simmel's
37 approach to the reconstruction of historical psychic phenomena mobilises the 'synthesis
38 of imagination', a notion which stands close to the key Diltheyan idea of 'imaginative
39 metamorphosis' explored in the *Poetics* (1887). In particular, through the 'third law' of
40 imaginative metamorphosis, the law of completion, the poetic imagination can
41 concentrate the image of an individual in a nucleus or core (*Kern*), and thus incorporate
42 any new element in relation to that innermost core (Makkreel, 1975: 102; Simmel,
43 1997: 274).
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53 Historical re-compositions are expected, like art, to give a more real rendition than the
54 real itself, as they let the inner unity of the studied phenomena and personalities, hidden
55 under apparent fragmentation, come to the fore. Reality becomes graspable as unity
56 when it is so to speak lit from within, through the unveiling of its inner structure of
57 meaning, that is to say 'the relationships between its innermost centre and its outermost
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periphery'(Simmel, 2003b: V, 2005: 3), or, as Dilthey had explained, in the relationships between the parts and the whole (Makkreel, 1975: 382).

But, even though history can construct 'the totality of a character' from the fragments of records, it is philosophy which is always concerned with the exploration of the relation of any phenomenon to the 'totality' of existence (Simmel, 1996c: 17). Thus, for example, only philosophy can relate to the work of art as a whole, that is to say, both 'as existence and as experience', in its individuality and its generality, in order to grasp its meaning (Simmel, 2003b: V, 2005: 3).

In the Preface to the *Philosophy of Money* (1900), we read that philosophy is the 'interpretation, colouring and individually selective emphasis of the real (*des Wirklichen*)' (1989b: 9), an operation geared by the philosopher's own disposition of spirit and his own inner relation to the great philosophical themes of human history (1996c: 28-30). More specifically, in the philosophical creation process, the philosopher feels himself the bearer of energies which have their roots beyond the purely personal 'convictions and opinions', in what Simmel calls 'the layer of typical spirituality (*Geistigkeit*) in us'. These 'typical spiritualities' of which there have only been few in the whole history of philosophy 'express the deepest and ultimate of a personal attitude to the world in a language of an image of the world' (1996c: 28, 30). In their article on Simmel's conception of philosophy, Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen and Olli Pyyhtinen have explained with great clarity how this 'typicality' of the philosopher is what enables him to construct a philosophy as 'an overall unity of meanings and contents... in accordance with a specific principle articulated by [himself as] type of philosopher' (2008: 312). It is this which allows the philosopher to approach phenomena so to speak from within, i.e. beneath and beyond 'fragmentary positive knowledge', and to reach to the 'totality of life' (Simmel, 1989b: 9). There is thus a form of resonance between the philosopher's 'formal inner quality' of the soul (1996c: 16) and the great philosophical *Weltanschauungen*, a form of resonance between the most particular and personal with the most general which enables the philosopher to probe into the deepest, and most universal, of human experience.

Thus Simmel's philosopher 'draws a directing line from the surface of economic processes leading into the last values and significance of all that is human' (1900); seizes a single thread out of the 'countless threads that make up reality', and pursues it 'through the entire web' (1910); 'deepen[s] below the surface of life, dig[s] out yet

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3 further layers of ideas under each of its appearances, in short ... *giv[es] meaning*
4 (*Sinngebung*) to these [appearances]' (1911); 'lower[s] the plumb line from the
5 immediate singular, the simply given into the layer of the ultimate spiritual meanings'
6 (1916) (1989b: 12, 1996b: 166, 1996c: 32, 2003b: 309).
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11 But what is exactly this 'inner quality', this 'ability' to totalise? Simmel warns us not to
12 mistake it for a 'psychological life attitude (*Lebensstimmung*)': it is, rather, a
13 'substantive... living condition (*sachliche... lebendige Bedingung*)' which is realised in
14 the philosopher's soul (1996c: 16), and not merely in his mind. It is a 'condition', which
15 colours the philosopher's entire mode of being, rather than just his intellectual outlook.
16 Simmel also talks about the philosopher's 'organ' for the 'receptivity and reactivity to
17 the totality of being' (1996c: 16). There thus seems to be more than a resonance
18 between the philosopher's construction of meaning and the great general philosophical
19 themes: philosophy rather appears as the receptacle, perhaps with amplifying properties,
20 for a totality of being which may thus not have so much to be constructed as to be taken
21 in. Philosophical creation resides in a disposition to receive and be responsive to what
22 Simmel later referred to as the 'existence (*Dasein*) of things' (2000: 321-322), we could
23 almost say to the 'being-there of things', so close are we to Heidegger's characterisation
24 of *what is called thinking* (Heidegger, 1968). Thus, in *Main problems of philosophy*
25 (1910), and although he had not fully developed his own concept of *Erlebnis* yet,
26 Simmel nevertheless characterised the philosophical attitude as a particularly developed
27 disposition for *Erlebnis*, and a particular mode of objectivating it by conveying a sense
28 of the whole.
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43 In his essay on religion (1995a), and especially in his last book, *Lebensanschauung (The*
44 *view of life)*, Simmel would generalise the possibility of such objectivation of lived
45 experience to all 'great functions of the spirit' – artistic creation, religious belief,
46 knowledge and the ethics of the 'individual law' (1999a: 237-238)³. Our shaping of the
47 world through the prism of each of these forms is at the same time a process in which
48 we strive for the constant interaction between the most personal in us with the most
49 general in human experience, which is how Simmel conceives of the struggle for the
50 overcoming of the fragmentation of life. It is probably this which led Gertrud
51 Kantorowicz to ascertain that 'there is no evasion' possible in such a philosophy of life
52 (2004: 478). But the reference for Simmel's struggle is the unity of *Erlebnis* and its
53 horizon is constant movement (between one's 'total existence' and the existence of
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3 things, between the spirit and its objectifications, between each single moment of our life
4 and the idea of our life as a whole). Simmel referred to such horizon as a 'third realm',
5 which, beyond the fractures of reality, seemed to open a path of quasi-mystical
6 unification to the individual soul (2004a: 264)⁴. The following two sections will help us
7 make more sense of such path.
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12 But coming back to our account of the philosophical attitude and its status in Simmel's
13 work as a whole, we can formulate the hypothesis that philosophy supplanted history as
14 'science of reality', or, put differently, that history, as 'science of reality', became fully
15 absorbed by Simmel's philosophy of life⁵. Thus it is philosophical, rather than
16 historical, explorations that Simmel quickly most sought to foster and harness, as the
17 counterpart to his psychological and sociological studies.
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24 Simmel's great investigation in the phenomenon of money and its meaning for modern
25 life, for example, started with a 'psychology of money' (1889) in which he addressed
26 the mental characteristics actualised through the money economy, and distinguished
27 'blaséness' as a particular condition of the well-off strata, evidencing a loss of
28 individuality (1889: 1258). In 1903 he would take up and develop the psychological
29 approach to the phenomenon of money by highlighting a 'metropolitan type of
30 individuality' (1957b: 228), whose distinct features of internal psychic organisation
31 (amongst which blaséness) in response to the 'external stimuli' are shared by those
32 pertaining to this type. But, in between these two essays comes the monumental
33 *Philosophy of Money* (1900, revised in 1907). Its approach to the blasé human being
34 and more generally modern man under the money economy is that of an exploration
35 from within of their 'soul processes' (*Seelenvorgänge*)⁶. In the following section we
36 analyse this approach, so as to prepare for our summing up, in section 3 of the stance
37 towards the world defining Simmel's philosophy.
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51 **2 – The 'remoteness from oneself' of the modern soul: an analysis of alienation or** 52 **of resonance with the movement of life?** 53 54

55 Simmel clearly announced his purpose in the Preface: the *Philosophy of Money* is an
56 exploration of the meaning of the 'totality' of life by means of the investigation of the
57 phenomenon of money and its reciprocal relations with the inner world of human
58 beings. It is not the analysis of the significance of the money economy for the shaping
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3 of modern man and culture which a Weberian approach would, perhaps, have entailed,
4 nor is it the unveiling of reification which Georg Lukacs would have liked it to be. Yet
5 Simmel's portrait of modern man under the rule of material culture set out inner loss of
6 oneself and hyper-subjectivity in an unparalleled way. What was the status of this
7 analysis? What attitude towards the world originated it and what are the implicatio
8 of
9 such an attitude?

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14 In the *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel suggested that money, from 'absolute means', had
15 become 'absolute end', relegating all values – including 'wisdom and art, personal
16 significance and strength, indeed beauty and love' (1989b: 312) – to means. Thus,
17 money imposes its 'forms' (exchange) onto all realms and, as all 'flux', seeks to
18 dissolve all other forms. This encroachment, and the resulting 'levelling brought about
19 by a socio-technical mechanism' (1957b: 227), goes together with 'counter-tendencies'
20 bringing about the entrenchment of a closed subjectivity:

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'And therefore now that these counter-tendencies have been coined, may they strive for the ideal of absolutely pure separation; where every material content of life becomes ever more matter of fact and impersonal, so that the non-reifiable (*nicht zu verdinglichende*) remainder becomes all the more personal and all the more indisputably the property of the I' (1989b: 652).

The latter sparked off Lukács' ire (Lukács, 1971: 156-157), but perhaps wrongly so, if we interpret this tendency strictly as the closure upon the self and the search for one's own subjectivity pointed out by Simmel as the corollary of the mechanisation of the world (2004a: 264): Simmel's ideal was not one of self-enclosed quest of the personality, even where it led to 'the subject's refinement, distinctiveness and turn to the inward (*Verinnerlichung*)' (1989b: 653) but, as we have suggested, one of unity in objectivation. Thus, in this line of analysis, the money economy encroaches upon all cultural areas and 'reifies' them (the quote above is one of the very few occasions in which Simmel uses the term⁷). What is not reified, what does not become a pure mechanism, is pushed back into the depths of subjectivity.

Indeed Simmel developed in that context an analysis of extreme 'remoteness' from oneself which he did not call alienation, but which in effect put forward the consequences of the modern money economy, its encroachments and its bloated material culture, on the inner make up of the personality: his well-known analysis of 'blasé-ness' (*Blasiertheit*). But alongside what he considered a 'limit case', he portrayed

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3 the more general modern personality as split by an ‘insuperable barrier... between itself
4 and what is most authentic and essential in it’. But, in order to be ‘remote from oneself’
5 (*aus sich selbst entfernt*), this ‘belonging-to-oneself’ (*Sich-Selbst-Gehören*), this ‘most
6 authentic, most essential’ being must still exist as such, somewhere, and must not have
7 completely surrendered to the domination of the ‘thousands of habits, thousands of
8 distractions, thousands of needs of a superficial kind’ (1989b: 674), as is the case with
9 the blasé man. Only if there remains something to be remote from is it possible to
10 conceive that,

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18 ‘the spirituality and composure of the soul, drowned under the loud splendour of the
19 scientific-technical age, takes revenge under the guise of an obscure feeling of tension and
20 disoriented longing (*Sehnsucht*)’ (1989b: 675).

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24 *Sehnsucht* is here meant as a longing or nostalgia for meaning – the missing meaning of
25 one’s life. It is vague and ‘disoriented’, a form of ‘secret disquiet, restless urgency’,
26 stemming from the loss of a ‘definite centre for the soul’, which, as much as the
27 development of the intellect, both originates in and further spurs the pace and
28 stimulation of modern life (1989b: 674-675). Although Simmel did not use the term in
29 the *Philosophy of Money*, we know from his later writings that this is a longing for that
30 primary human state of *Erleben*, where the personality is at one with itself and the
31 world.
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38 But this very lack (through loss) of an inner centre, this permanent imbalance, which
39 causes such ‘disquiet’ and ‘longing’ yet also pushes one to ever more and ever renewed
40 pursuits, is, for Simmel, a kind of tension which resonates with the pulse of modern life.
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Indeed this constant tension besetting the modern individual provides him/her, if he/she
is able to withstand it, with the ‘momentum of interiority’ (1989b: 674). It is movement
which is determining here, and partial, momentary, syntheses between one’s interiority
and the world of objects may take place, subordinated to that movement:

‘the meaning of life is absolutely not to obtain in reality the continuity of reconciled
conditions for which it strives’ (1989b: 674).

We discern here, in these crucial pages of the last section of the ‘Style of life’, a
perspective on modern culture which helps us understand better the kind of ‘paths from
the soul to itself’ that can subsist when the soul is confronted to an objective culture
turned into ‘congealed spirit’ (1996a: 385), as the reciprocal action between material

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3 objective and subjective culture here takes the form of perpetual imbalance and shifting
4 (Jankélévitch, 1988: 28). In this perpetual imbalance, a contact between objective and
5 subjective culture is still maintained, as the disquiet and restlessness felt by the subject,
6 his/her longing, stem from the very restlessness of modern life and further fuel it.
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10 One has therefore to ask whether this longing, this *Sehnsucht* of the Simmelian subject,
11 which Weber saw as evidence of the attempt to escape from confronting the world, was
12 not, in Simmel's understanding of it, what allows for the reciprocal action between the
13 material objective and inner subjective world to be preserved in a world whose
14 'tragedy' is the seemingly ever widening rift between subjective and objective logics
15 (1996a). As the 'blasé' attitude, with which it can quite conceivably alternate in one and
16 the same individual, it involves an 'atrophy of individual culture' (1957b: 241). But, at
17 the same time, Simmel seemed to suggest that, contrary to the pure 'blasé' attitude
18 which simply organises subjectivity through its 'internalisation of the money economy'
19 and hence total submission to objective culture, this disquiet and restlessness perhaps
20 epitomize a new culture more at one with the movement of life. Indeed, Simmel saw the
21 'interactive realities (*Wechselwirksamkeiten*)' of the *Philosophy of Money* as 'contents
22 of a relativism that now no longer signified the sceptical melting into air of all that is
23 solid, but precisely the prevention of the same by means of a new concept of solidity'
24 (1958: 9)⁸.
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38 Simmel's quest for the unveiling of meaning turned him away from an analysis of the
39 encroachments of money on all spheres of life as analysis of the reification of relations,
40 and thus away from a critique of contemporary capitalism, and rather led him to
41 subsume this analysis under a more general understanding of money as symbol of life
42 and its endless dynamic of form-giving and form-submerging. Money is both 'the
43 carrier of a movement in which everything that is not movement is completely
44 dissolved, ... so to speak [an] *actus purus*...' and, 'what is most constant, ... the point
45 of indifference and compensation between all other contents of this world, whose ideal
46 meaning is, as that of the law, to give their measure to all things without measuring
47 itself to them' (1989b: 305). Money is, in each moment, the confluence of the
48 contraries, movement and constancy, indifference and value⁹. But the value of money,
49 by measuring all things, contributes to the very dissolution of all values and forms that
50 the movement of money as flux also entails – that is why Simmel talks about an anti-
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3 individualism of money, money is close to pure movement which does away with
4 particularisation.
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7 Money thus seemed one of these instances which opened up to the third realm which
8 Simmel called for, 'in the coming epoch', a realm which was not one of synthesis or
9 reconciliation between opposed concepts of life, but a path in which 'life' would take
10 over and flow through contradictions (1995b: 165-166). Simmel regularly referred to
11 such an imagined realm in which life would submerge every single act or experience – a
12 realm in which life would take over to such extent that it would even dissolve
13 individuality, leading to an ultimate generality and typifying of life as pure movement
14 and therefore evading 'the ultimate individual differentiation... [through] an anti-
15 individualist form' (1957a: 157). As Lilyane Deroche-Gurcel has pointed out in her
16 subtle analysis of Simmel and modernity, in Simmel's eyes, Rodin's statues prefigured
17 such a realm (Deroche-Gurcel, 1997: 300): their individual contours are blurred as they
18 are swept by movement, and as they are 'dragged into the infinity of emergence and
19 destruction', and 'constantly stand at the point where becoming and demise meet',
20 'giving up each substance and unity of life to the mere moment of absolute
21 becoming' (Simmel, 2003b: 445, 2005: 105).
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34 Simmel's third realm is similarly a realm of pure movement, in which the self-
35 transcendence of life is so continuous that form is constantly on the brink of being
36 dissolved into flux. Whereas, as we had suggested at the end of section 1, philosophy
37 had supplanted history in the exploration of meaning, the historian, in Simmel's last
38 works, seemed to himself supplant the philosopher in the capacity to be a mere vector of
39 the supra-individual movement of life (whilst the philosopher remains the carrier of a
40 specific *Weltanschauung*):
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47 'The rhythm, the constant movement of life is the formal carrier of understanding
48 (*Verständnis*)... However, the actual, effective liveliness of this ideal subject is a
49 transformation or objectivation of that very same [liveliness] which we sense in ourselves but
50 into a supra-individual [liveliness], for which we are but an example as it were.' (1999b: 175-
51 176)
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56 Indeed we would argue that such aspiration to being constantly on the border of
57 complete submerging of form by life is Simmel's own peculiar mystic quest, whereby
58 merging into the One is always ahead, as well as behind, and life a perpetual imbalance
59 so as to preserve this overall encompassing equilibrium.
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3 Thus, coming back to the figure of the troubled and longing man of the modern money
4 economy, it seems to us, paradoxically, that, by immersing the momentary
5 reconciliations allowed between subjectivity and objects into restless movement,
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7 Simmel pointed to the possibility of a 'reconciliation' at a higher level, a reconciliation
8 and unity with the movement of 'life' as such. But then this meant an anchoring of the
9 idea of individual unity in that of life: Simmel undertook this task in the last chapter of
10 his last book (*Lebensanschauung*), in which the 'individual law' is shown to be found in
11 every instant of one's life, for 'life does not reserve a somehow separable "purity" and
12 being for itself beyond the beat of its pulse' (2003b: 314, 2005: 6). The idea of
13 individual law thus enabled Simmel to preserve the idea of the unity of existence (as a
14 never to be reached horizon) whilst acknowledging its relentless changeability.
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23 This meant demanding permanent tension from life in the world as, so to speak, proof of
24 life: but a tension that was antithetic to the tension required, for example, in Weberian
25 life conduct; a tension of equilibrium through permanent imbalance, an 'immobile
26 dialectic' (Léger, 1989: 323), rather than a tension born from taking stances in the world
27 and pushing back the boundaries of the possible.
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35 **3 – Simmel's philosophical stance toward the world and its relevance to address** 36 **our time** 37

38 This section is an exploration of Simmel's philosophical stance toward the world done
39 with a view to position it in the context of twentieth century philosophy and to provide
40 an initial appraisal of its relevance to address our times. Simmel's philosophical stance,
41 that 'spiritual attitude toward the world and life' (Simmel, 1996b: 162) which for him
42 constitutes the essential aspect of philosophy, has to be situated in line with
43 romanticism or, rather, at the crossroads, or the in-between, formed by the romantic
44 tradition and certain elements of Kantian philosophy which allowed it to resist the
45 romantic way while being profoundly inspired by it. It is a line with a strong anti-
46 Cartesian thrust foreshadowed by Nietzsche and Bergson, extended in Germany through
47 the cult of the genius and the poet, and continued in diverse ways by Heidegger and his
48 followers, as well as by Deleuze. We contend that it is the Simmelian stance what above
49 all accounts for the huge and profound, but often unrecognised, influence of Simmel's
50 thought on twentieth century scholarship and philosophy; and that if this influence, over
51 and above the well-known partial uses of Simmel in the social sciences, has been
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3 considered difficult to discern (e.g. Goodstein, 2002), it is because we usually tend to
4 overlook or take for granted not only Simmel's stance toward the world, but also our
5 own.
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9 Actually it has not been sufficiently or at all realized that fundamental, defining
10 components of the Simmelian stance are to a very large extent shared not only with
11 Bergson and other life philosophies very different from Simmel's such as Deleuze's, but
12 with the phenomenological *cum* hermeneutical and deconstructive currents as well.
13 Recapitulating the components of Simmel's philosophical stance which have emerged
14 from our analysis above, there is, first of all, a profound yearning or longing (akin to the
15 romantic *Sehnsucht*) which, secondly, triggers a quest for what can be called, with
16 Simmel, a third realm that typically becomes a finite sphere of the in-between deployed
17 in the infinite conceived of as a temporal horizon; thirdly, the attempt to develop a new
18 mode of thinking which, while characteristic of every philosophy proper, in Simmel's
19 case takes the form of a sustained effort to go beneath and beyond purely discursive,
20 conceptual thought, deemed inadequate to grasp the pulse of life; finally, a strong
21 emphasis on, in Simmel's terms, human limitedness or, in current philosophical
22 parlance, finitude. The importance of these elements, which are closely interrelated and
23 articulated within the Simmelian stance, goes much beyond the pastimes consisting in
24 post-modernising Simmel and playing games with fragments, fluidity and nomadic
25 subject positions (e.g. Weinstein & Weinstein, 1993); indeed they are at the core of an
26 entire philosophical line in the twentieth century, where they were deployed to extremes
27 that Simmel, to the extent that he could envisage them, refused to follow.
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43 As Jankélévitch (1988: 14) has argued, Simmel's work is pervaded by the *Sehnsucht*
44 'atmosphere' that prevailed in Germany at the time; not only does his work somehow
45 translate such atmosphere, but this very *Sehnsucht* is also what constitutes the
46 motivating force and impulse of Simmel's thought. As we have seen in section 2, it is 'a
47 feeling of tension, expectation, unresolved longing' (1992: 189) produced by a peculiar
48 way of processing the uneasiness or distress over modern civilisation and its
49 rationalising, mechanical workings. Simmel interprets it as the soul's revenge against
50 modern conditions (Simmel, 1989b: 675); yet Simmel's philosophical longing is neither
51 reactive nor aimless, but active and directed to envisaging and grasping a third realm
52 able to contain the very pulse of life in its profound dynamism. But as Badiou (1998)
53 has pointed out concerning Deleuze and as is the case of any such attempt, the
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3 movement of life is a version of the One (here named 'life'; in other philosophies
4 'substance', 'whole' or 'all') whose deployment or movement is not thinkable in its
5 pure being but only as an in-between of two movements, whether of objectivation and
6 subjectivation (Simmel) or, in terms by no means alien to Simmel (e.g. in the Tragedy
7 of Culture, except that he refers to potentiality rather than virtuality), of actualisation
8 and virtualisation (Deleuze). Yet, these two movements are nothing but two new
9 versions the One. Life thus appears suspended between itself as a weak variant of life
10 and itself as a strong variant of life, with the result that pure, inconsistent multiplicity or
11 multiplicity without one (Badiou, see below) is denied or at any rate not graspable
12 through experiential understanding, no matter how seismographically accurate, to
13 paraphrase Gadamer's apposite reference to Simmel (Gadamer, 2004: 55), experiential
14 descriptions are.

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25 The construction of an in-between involves a further determination in thought whereby
26 it appears as a permanent horizon of becoming. In this sense Simmel's is, as we have
27 suggested, a mystical longing for fusion with the very movement of life which, as he
28 insists once and again, knows perfectly well that no rest is possible as long as there is
29 life, yet seeks to reach the highest possible harmony with it. Here lies what we might
30 call the paradox and the courage of the Simmelian stance, which held firmly to that
31 almost impossible and hardly bearable position that we have called 'equilibrium through
32 permanent imbalance', and strove to give its due, without conceding any primacy, to
33 both objectivation and subjectivation. Simmel's faithfulness to his conception of life
34 went as far as making his *Sehnsucht* oscillate, as Jankélévitch aptly observes (1988: 78),
35 between immanence and transcendence. This oscillation is another version of the
36 experiential construction of the in-between which, as we have just highlighted, involves
37 a horizontal dimension consisting in the temporal deployment of the historicity of
38 finitude or, in a more Simmelian language, of the fundamental limitedness of human
39 existence.

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52 The profound connections of the Simmelian stance with Heidegger's, amply
53 commented in the literature, can be made manifest as soon as we recall the weighty
54 Heideggerian themes and figures of finitude, being-for-death, and meditative or poetic
55 (that is, for Heidegger, non philosophical) thinking. In his own peculiar way, Heidegger
56 himself recognised Simmel's influence, if not publicly, at least to his student
57 Gadamer.¹⁰ Most significantly, Simmel's mystical longing becomes an unmistakable
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3 flight from the world in Heidegger's stance, as can be seen by considering the figure
4 *par excellence* of Heideggerian mysticism: the no-longer and not-yet time of waiting for
5 the re-sacralisation of the earth or the re-enchantment of the world; as Heidegger put it
6 in his last intervention in 1966, after famously declaring that 'only a God can still save
7 us', it is a time of waiting in 'preparation of the readiness, of keeping oneself open for
8 the arrival of or the absence of the god' (2003: 38-39). We need not mention here other,
9 similar attitudes, such as Derrida's eschatological positing of a perpetually deferred
10 horizon of the '*toujours à venir*' (always to come). Let us only add that these are the
11 kind of attitudes that Weber observed in Germany and admonished against at the end of
12 *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, where he summoned his audience to act differently, instead of
13 simply yearning and waiting.

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23 Weber's warning could not be more fitting, for it is about politics, that is, precisely what
24 Simmel did not recognise as an autonomous realm or world. Indeed Simmel considered,
25 in perfect consonance with his apolitical position, that the different realms are parallel
26 worlds, not in struggle or in tension, since the rift is between life and its petrification or
27 between different intensities of life. In truth none of the philosophical currents we have
28 mentioned here recognise politics as an autonomous realm. In Simmel's (here again, not
29 isolated) case, this non recognition of politics has to be considered alongside the
30 extraordinary importance he granted to religion, together with the aesthetic sphere. In
31 this respect one has to acknowledge that the critiques – e.g. by Weber, Lukács and more
32 recently by Coletti (1979) and Habermas (1996) – of Simmel and his philosophy as
33 leading to escape from the world and lacking commitment have a point. Our own
34 objection to the Simmelian stance concerns both philosophy and politics. Firstly, such
35 stance is very problematic for philosophy in that it may easily lead to a philosophically
36 unacceptable blend of philosophy (that is, the quest for truth which relies on the human
37 mind on its own, unaided or unhindered by revelation and presence, and is rationally
38 accessible and transmissible) and religion or religions of all kinds – a danger
39 particularly acute today, after the proclamation of the end of history and without a
40 strong alternative, emancipatory politics clearly in sight. Simmel's hesitation, brought
41 out in section 1, between a unity which is philosophically constructed and a unity which
42 is pre-theoretically received in *Erlebnis* and philosophically objectivated points to this
43 affinity between philosophy and religion. This hesitation comes very much to the fore
44 when Simmel leaves it open, as practically all life philosophies and all philosophical
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currents in quest for some kind of presence have tended to do, as to whether mysticism (which he approaches through Meister Eckhart) should be considered to pertain to philosophy or not since both connect ‘the deepest submersion in ourselves’ with ‘the absolute unity of things’ through a ‘point’ at which ‘this unity’ (of existence, of God) ‘reveal[s] itself (*sich offenbarte*) as our essence and unity’ (1996c: 16). The revelation of an ‘intuited’ unity of existence brings philosophy very close indeed to religion – and leads us to question the status of such thought as philosophy¹¹.

Secondly, the Simmelian stance seems perfectly compatible, and many uses of Simmel would seem to confirm this, with sheer conformism and adaptation to the world. It is only too evident that both aspects, this form of philosophising referred to above and mere adaptation to the world, can and do go very well together. Simmel himself, for example, did not doubt to adopt the quite widespread view of the war as a moment which could help re-establishing vital connections between the individual human being (more concretely here: the soldier) and the overall course of events, so that ‘people who have experienced (*erlebt*) the overcoming of [this tension between subjective and objective cultures] on the battlefield may perhaps also feel the significance of their other anonymous, partial contributions more clearly and in a so to speak more personal way’ (Simmel, 1917: 63). The search for meaning, for ‘relating the parts to the whole’, was here clearly pointing to making sense of what there is, without suggesting any take on ‘reality’. This stands in the sharpest contrast with a thought as pervaded by politics as Weber’s, for whom a ‘science of reality’ (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*), far from lying in uncovering meaning, should direct the gaze of contemporary and future readers and listeners to the ‘inconvenient fact’ that *they* have to create meaning (1988b: 154) and confront a world of struggle between deadly opposed values and conceptions of the world, which they play out in their choices and non-choices whether they want it or not (1988a: 507).

By way of conclusion

Simmel’s philosophical stance toward the world could be described as a meditative immersion in life done with a view to gain meaning. In such a stance the world appears as an object to be experienced, while it is the self what has to be transformed so as to make it harmonise with life. The world is thus left totally untouched while the self struggles to find unity and ultimately to fuse with life. We would like to suggest that it

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3 is this unmistakable mystical thrust what constitutes the charm of Simmel's thought for
4 what has been called 'postmodernity' and that beneath and beyond the fragments there
5 lies the yearning for the One – a yearning that grows from a prior twofold abdication
6 which is simultaneously reinforced by it, namely: abdication before death or the
7 resigned conception of Man as a finite being destined to die, and abdication before the
8 world or the deluded idea that politics has been overcome, or at any rate has no
9 importance. This is how a paradigmatic breeding ground for the worst kinds of politics
10 is provided, while the postmodern age issues its (anti-Simmelian) injunction to
11 *jouissance*, the compulsion to enjoy the fragments, the passing moments and the errant
12 subject positions.

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14 Those who take Simmel seriously and not simply as a pastime for dilettantes will
15 probably recognise that the possibilities of Simmel's philosophy have in different ways
16 been amply explored in the twentieth century, particularly by Heidegger and his
17 followers, and that it is probably not possible to go beyond them. But today's
18 philosophical situation, in our view, which very much differs from Lehtonen and
19 Pyyhtinen's (2008), is not any longer dominated by Heidegger's thought and its motive
20 of 'the end' (the end of philosophy, of grand narratives, of the subject). It cannot be,
21 since there is an open confrontation with another philosophy, that of Alain Badiou
22 (1988, 1998), which defines itself in radical departure from the philosophical landscape
23 occupied by Heidegger and his followers, whilst recognising that some of its insights
24 and ideas are indispensable. This new situation is one in which, to put it in a nutshell,
25 philosophy 'has started again', the 'end of all ends' has been proclaimed, the categories
26 of 'truth' and 'subject' have been reconstructed and all quests for meaning, unification
27 with metaphysical entities, returns and re-enchantments have been declared religious or
28 mystical.

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30 To live, to lead a true human life for Badiou (2006) is to incorporate oneself into a
31 subject or to devote oneself to a true (for all) cause, to the point of – as Max Weber,
32 many years before Badiou, did not hesitate to add – 'perish[ing] in the calling' (1920:
33 548).

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For Peer Review

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46 ¹ Rudolph Weingartner also argues that Simmel's philosophy of life weaves together the many threads of
47 his work (Weingartner, 1962). And Hans Blumenberg asks 'whether Georg Simmel would ever have
48 struck a chord with his "Philosophy of Money" had he not gone on to invent the philosophy of life'
49 (Blumenberg, 2011).
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52 ² As per the subtitle to his 1890 *On social differentiation*.
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55 ³ Simmel treats the philosophical *Weltanschauungen* and the moulding of the 'fabric of the world' by the
56 great functions of the spirit into separate, autonomous, parallel worlds, as two comparable but distinct
57 processes. And it is thus not clear where philosophy stands in relation to Simmel's 'ontological worlds'.
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60 ⁴ Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen also note the crucial importance of the notion of the 'domain of the third' for
Simmel's philosophy and work as a whole. They similarly associate it with movement, referring e.g. to
the conclusion of Simmel's essay on *Kant and Goethe*, where he imagines a third realm in which neither

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of their *Weltanschauung* would triumph, but which would rather be a domain of ‘development of their standpoints in infinite reciprocity’ (Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen, 2008: 305). The essay on Kant and Goethe is crucial for a proper understanding of Simmel’s turn to the philosophy of life. On that point see also Bleicher (2007) and Levine (2008).

⁵ At least until Simmel’s conception of the historical attitude had come so close to the philosophical one that we can say that his philosophy of history had become absorbed by his philosophy of life (i.e. in his three last essays in the philosophy of history (Simmel, 1999b, 2000, 2003a).

⁶ Birgitta Nedelmann draws the attention on the term, which underpins *Blasiertheit* in her view, but she uses it for both the analysis of the ‘Metropolis’ essay and that of the *Philosophy of Money*. She distinguishes the two analyses, but on other counts than the distinction between Simmel’s philosophical and psychological approach (Nedelmann, 1990: 232).

⁷ David Frisby comments on the allegedly frequent use of ‘reification (*Verdinglichung*)’ by Simmel, whereas *Verdinglichung* or terms with the same root only appear 3 times in the CD of Simmel’s works, admittedly all in the *Philosophy of Money*. But Frisby and Bottomore translate the most diverse array of expressions (e.g. *Substanziierung* –substantialisation, *Verkörperung*, embodiment, *Wirklichkeit* – reality – alongside *Verdinglichung*) as ‘reification’. See Simmel (2004b: 20).

⁸ Elizabeth Goodstein accepts Simmel’s argument and considers that Simmel’s relativism constituted a new way of thinking. Yet in her conclusion she seems to forget about the idea of movement which is central to Simmel’s relativism and to his idea of third realm, and to locate his contemporary relevance in the *contents* of relations, i.e. in the ‘specific epistemic and ethical dilemmas’ ‘lived out by modern subjects in the forms of life described by Simmel (Goodstein, 2002: 217, 230). Simmel’s relativism is better understood, as pointed out by François Léger, as ‘relationism’ (Léger, 1989: 25).

⁹ As noted by many commentators, Simmel likened money and its effect on values to Nicolas de Cusa’s vision of God as *coincidentia oppositorum*.

¹⁰ ‘As early as 1923, Heidegger spoke to me with admiration of the late writings of Georg Simmel. This was not just a general acknowledgment of Simmel as a philosophical personality. The specific stimulus that Heidegger had received from his work will be apparent to anyone who today reads, in the first of the four “Metaphysical Chapters” gathered together under the title *Lebensanschauung*, what the dying Simmel conceived as his philosophical task’ (Gadamer 2004: 264).

¹¹ For a different view on the implications of the relation between religion and philosophy (or science) in Simmel’s thought as compared with Weber’s, see Harrington (2010).

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**Beneath and Beyond the Fragments: The Charms of Simmel’s Philosophical Path
for Contemporary Subjectivities**

For Peer Review

Beneath and Beyond the Fragments: The Charms of Simmel's Philosophical Path for Contemporary Subjectivities

Isabelle Darmon and Carlos Frade

Abstract

Our purpose in this paper is to explore the reasons for the continued attractiveness of Simmel's thought today, grounding it in contemporary affinities to his philosophical stance towards the world. We first seek to characterise Simmel's notion of the 'philosophical attitude', as it emerged from his quest for rendering 'reality' from within, unveiling its inner structure of meaning and reaching to its unity. We argue that Simmel ultimately grounded it in the philosopher's particularly developed disposition for *Erlebnis*, i.e. the unified, pre-theoretical, pre-conceptual experience of each moment of reality and life, and in a particular mode of objectivating this experience by conveying a sense of the whole. We provide an illustration of such an approach and its implications through his analysis of 'remoteness from oneself' and the restlessness it entails in the *Philosophy of Money*. We argue that Simmel's attempt at phenomenologically unveiling the contours and depths of life moments and fragments as well as his emphasis on constant movement provide contemporary subjectivities with a comforting feeling of reassurance. But Simmel's philosophical stance is also driven by a quasi-mystical longing (*Sehnsucht*) for unification with life which gives expression to the deeply felt yearning for the One that lies, both for postmodern subjectivities and for a major philosophical path that he opened up in the 20th century, beneath and beyond the fragments. This prompts us to offer an initial assessment of the main implications of such philosophical stance by relating it to the philosophical path that he opened up (Heidegger and his followers but also in part Deleuze) and by placing it in what we understand to be the new philosophical situation today.

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3-7 Keywords

Experience, Life, Philosophy, Simmel

Deleted: On this basis we connect Simmel's philosophical stance to a trend linking Bergson to Heidegger and in part to Deleuze in the attempt to develop a new mode of thinking going beneath and beyond purely conceptual thought, and we argue that this powerfully accounts for its contemporary appeal. But this philosophical trend is also marked by a not unrelated temptation to deny the multiplicity of being and to herald new versions of 'the One' (e.g. life). It is thus a current in which philosophy can (and does, in Simmel's case) come very close to religion, in particular to mysticism, and which accommodates a concomitant denial of the autonomy of politics. We argue that these too are attractive features for contemporary subjectivities but draw the attention to their compatibility with conformism and adaptation to the world. ¶

Introduction

For some time, revival of interest in Simmel's work seemed to be predicated upon its resonance with post-modern fear of 'grand narratives' and its professed delight in the fragmentary, the fleeting, the momentary. Yet, as knowledge of his work accrued, and as the edition of his complete works became available, interest widened to encompass the philosophical underpinnings of his essayist production, although only recently to the point of trying to come to terms with his thought as a whole. While the appropriation and use of particular aspects of Simmel's work has continued unabated, thus fulfilling his own prophecy about his intellectual legacy, we would like to argue that Simmel's charm goes much further and deeper than 'cold cash distributed among many heirs, each transforming his portion according to his nature' (Simmel 2004a: 263). This article is meant as an exploration of the reasons for the discreet appeal of Simmel's stance toward the world today.

We first seek to characterise the 'philosophical attitude' which Simmel advocated beyond all specific substantive philosophical concerns – as it emerged from his quest, already present in his philosophy of history, for rendering 'reality' from within, unveiling its inner structure of meaning and reaching to its unity. We show that it is grounded in a disposition for receiving reality as a whole, a disposition for unified lived experience (*Erlebnis*) akin to aesthetic *Erlebnis*, and a capacity to objectivate this experience without losing the sense of the whole, beyond the fragmentation of reality. We suggest that such a mode of objectivation constituted for Simmel a horizon, a 'third', fully realised in the figure of the 'genius' (section 1), Simmel's treatment of alienation, or rather of 'remoteness from oneself' in the *Philosophy of Money* provides us, in section 2, with an illustration of the depths of existential analysis to which such philosophical attitude was conducive, but also of the muting of all critical charges against the domination of material culture, as we show that money and the movement it entails prefigured Simmel's notions of the 'third realm' and 'individual law', and thereby the possibility of higher reconciliations of modern restlessness with the movement of life. This leads us, in section 3, to characterise Simmel's philosophical stance towards the world and to highlight, in particular, its drive in a quasi-mystical longing (*Sehnsucht*) for the One. We put forward the hypothesis that such longing for the one, together with the emphasis on the moments, fragments and movement of life which give rise to and comfort it, might be where the deeper attractiveness of Simmel's

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work has lied for 20th century thought and where it lies again for contemporary subjectivities. This prompts us to offer an assessment of the implications of such philosophical stance, in particular of its political impasse, by placing it in relation to what we understand to be the new philosophical situation today.

1 – Simmel's path to a philosophical attitude: from 'science of reality' to philosophy and the 'totality of being'

For those inclined to see overall continuity in Simmel's work, it has become again customary to highlight the powerful and unifying theme of 'life' as guiding thread (Lash 2005; Levine 2008; Pyyhtinen 2010). This is but a rediscovery, for in 1925, Vladimir Jankélévitch had already unravelled and demonstrated the early, encompassing and pervasive influence of Simmel's very specific notion of life on all his writings, and indeed the fusion, in the last part of his life, between his aesthetics, his philosophy of history and his philosophy of life (Jankélévitch 1988)¹.

Yet perhaps it is preferable not to take this path, at least not immediately, if we want, as is our purpose in this paper, to assess Simmel's legacy from the perspective of the stance towards the world that it affords. For the notion of life is all-encompassing and beyond all assessment. It seems to demand struggles, yet the status of these struggles is unclear.

Perhaps it is preferable, then, to go back to a notion that was always on the brink of being absorbed by that of 'life', but which could also open up to completely different paths: the notion of 'reality' (*Wirklichkeit*). For the 'real' and 'concrete' were what 19th century German scholars, led by historians, had wanted to oppose to the 'abstract' 'teleological universal thought' associated with the ideals of the French Revolution (Dilthey 1883: XV-XVI; Troeltsch 1922: 19). In particular, in the controversies which presided over the attempts to ground the 'human sciences' (Wilhelm Dilthey), 'the cultural sciences' (Heinrich Rickert) or 'social and cultural' sciences (Max Weber) as such, Simmel was one of the first contributors to characterise history as a 'science of reality' (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*), and to assert the capacity of history to grasp the individual and the concrete in opposition to nomological deduction in the natural sciences, or indeed as a complement to the more formal and abstract approaches which he developed in his own 'sociological and psychological investigations'²: thus, in his

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Deleted: This stance, partly couched in national terms, also translated onto the field of affirmation and struggle of the historical sciences against the natural sciences and against the application of their abstraction to the understanding of human processes, as positivism pretended to do. The 'concrete', the 'living', the 'singular' were emphasised by the historical (as well as the historicising) sciences both as object of analysis and as goal (for the fostering of self-awareness – *Selbstbesinnung* – and the construction of the personality in its singularity) (Hennis 2000: 126; Hübinger 1988)(Hennis, 2000, p. 126; Hübinger, 1988)(Hennis, 2000: 126; Hübinger, 1988).¶ In this connection it is useful to remember that, i

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1892 Problems of the Philosophy of history, Simmel asserted that historical science is a 'science of reality', in that

'the knowledge of the facts which are enclosed in [the historical] is precisely of interest to us; [that] it seems valuable to us to know the individual persons and the individual events, with which the evolution of our race has counted. (Simmel 1989a: 348-349)³.

But such concrete, individual reality cannot be grasped by a purely conceptual apparatus; it can only be reconstructed through operations engaging 'understanding'. If, as Simmel later stated in *Main problems of philosophy (1910)*, reality is the 'world given to us as sum of fragments' (1996c: 32), then the apprehension of reality is referred to the possibility of unified grasp of the world and oneself, a possibility which Simmel found in the 'synthesis of imagination' performed by the historian, as pictured in the second edition (1905-7) of the *Problems of the Philosophy of History* (1997: 274)⁴; in the 'totalising ability of the soul', particularly characterising philosophers (1996c: 17); and which he ultimately came to ground, in his very last essays in the philosophy of history, in the pre-theoretical, pre-conceptual 'response of our total existence (*Gesamtexistenz*), drawn from much wider and very fundamental layers, to the existence (*Dasein*) of things' (2000: 321-322), that is to say in *Erlebnis* (lived experience). Thus Simmel, who from the start of his reflection on history, associated it with art, came to define that relation in increasingly precise terms and finally consider that the knowledge of concrete historical reality required the understanding and composition of this reality as unity 'from within', as unity of meaning.

Historical re-compositions are expected, like art, to give a more real rendition than the real itself, as they let the inner unity of the studied phenomena and personalities, hidden under apparent fragmentation, come to the fore. Reality becomes graspable as unity when it is so to speak lit from within, as in Rembrandt's art, through the unveiling of its inner structure of meaning, that is to say 'the relationships between its innermost centre and its outermost periphery' (Simmel 2003c: V, 2005: 3).

But, even though history can construct 'the totality of a character' from the fragments of records, it is philosophy which is always concerned with the exploration of the relation of any phenomenon to the 'totality' of existence (Simmel 1996c: 17). Thus, for example, only philosophy can relate to the work of art as a whole, that is to say, both 'as existence and as experience', in its individuality and its generality, in order to grasp its meaning (Simmel 2003c: V, 2005: 3). Simmel explained the nature of philosophical

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Let us examine this later conception of history more closely. The re-composition of reality demands its compression, condensation, re-expansion in images of the world or of concrete figures: in that sense, the elaboration of reality demanded from the historian does not differ from artistic elaboration. Simmel's approach to the reconstruction of historical psychic phenomena mobilises the 'synthesis of imagination', a notion which stands close to the key Diltheyan idea of 'imaginative metamorphosis' explored in the *Poetics* (1887). In particular, through the 'third law' of imaginative metamorphosis, the law of completion, the poetic imagination can concentrate the image of an individual in a nucleus or core (*Kern*), and thus incorporate any new element in relation to that innermost core (Makkreel 1975: 102; Simmel 1997: 274).

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work and its underpinning stance in a number of crucial prefaces of his mature work, especially the Preface to *The philosophy of Money* (1900), to *Philosophical culture* (1911) and to *Rembrandt* (1916), as well as in the *Main Problems of Philosophy* (1910). Together they form a consistent whole, even though not all the apparatus of Simmel's philosophy of life is present before *Rembrandt*.

In the Preface to the *Philosophy of Money* (1900), we read that philosophy is the 'interpretation, colouring and individually selective emphasis of the real (*des Wirklichen*)' (1989b: 9), an operation geared, as we learn in the *Main problems*, by the philosopher's own disposition of spirit and his own inner relation to the great philosophical themes of human history (1996c: 28-30). More specifically, in the philosophical creation process, the philosopher feels himself the bearer of energies which have their roots beyond the purely personal 'convictions and opinions', in what Simmel calls 'the layer of typical spirituality (*Geistigkeit*) in us'. These 'typical spiritualities' of which there have only been few in the whole history of philosophy 'express the deepest and ultimate of a personal attitude to the world in a language of an image of the world' (1996c: 28, 30). In their article on Simmel's conception of philosophy, Turo-Kimmo Lehtonen and Olli Pyyhtinen have made clear how this 'typicality' of the philosopher is what enables him to construct a philosophy as 'an overall unity of meanings and contents... in accordance with a specific principle articulated by [himself as] type of philosopher' (2008: 312). It is this which allows the philosopher to approach phenomena so to speak from within, i.e. beneath and beyond 'fragmentary positive knowledge', and to reach to the 'totality of life' (Simmel 1989b: 9). There is a form of resonance between the philosopher's 'formal inner quality' of the soul (1996c: 16) and the great philosophical *Weltanschauungen*, a form of resonance between the most particular and personal with the most general which enables the philosopher to probe into the deepest, and most universal, of human experience.

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Thus Simmel's philosopher 'draws a directing line from the surface of economic processes leading into the last values and significance of all that is human' (*The philosophy of money*, 1900); seizes a single thread out of the 'countless threads that make up reality', and pursues it 'through the entire web' (*Main problems of philosophy*, 1910); 'deepen[s] below the surface of life, dig[s] out yet further layers of ideas under each of its appearances, in short ... *giv[es] meaning (Sinnggebung)* to these [appearances]' (*Philosophical culture*, 1911); 'lower[s] the plumb line from the

immediate singular, the simply given into the layer of the ultimate spiritual meanings' (*Rembrandt*, 1916) (1989b: 12, 1996b: 166, 1996c: 32, 2003c: 309).

But what is exactly this 'inner quality', this 'ability' to totalise? Simmel warns us not to mistake it for a 'psychological life attitude (*Lebensstimmung*)': it is, rather, a 'substantive... living condition (*sachliche... lebendige Bedingung*)' which is realised in the philosopher's soul (1996c: 16), and not merely in his mind⁵. It is a 'condition', which colours the philosopher's entire mode of being, rather than just his intellectual outlook. Simmel also talks about the philosopher's 'organ' for the 'receptivity and reactivity to the totality of being' (1996c: 16). There thus seems to be more than a resonance between the philosopher's construction of meaning and the great general philosophical themes: rather each typical philosophical attitude, immanent in philosophical thinking⁶, appears, through its connection with universal themes, as a specific receptacle for a totality of being which may not have so much to be constructed as to be taken in. Philosophical creation seems hardly distinguishable from a disposition to receive and be responsive to what Simmel later referred to as the 'existence (*Dasein*) of things' (2000: 321-322), we could almost say to the 'being-there of things', so seemingly close are we to Heidegger's characterisation of *what is called thinking* (*Heidegger 1968*). Thus, in *Main problems of philosophy* (1910), and although he had not fully developed his own concept of *Erlebnis* yet, Simmel nevertheless characterised the philosophical attitude as a particularly developed disposition for *Erlebnis as mode of reception of the world as whole*, and a particular conceptual mode of objectivating it, able to convey a sense of this whole:

'This is why the unification of the world is the truly philosophical act, whereby is expressed the fact that here the response of the soul is given to the impression of the totality of being' (1996c: 36).

In *Main problems*, Simmel already extended this capacity to 'take up all given content' and 'shape the whole scope of existence,... translate the whole world in their language' to all those 'great forms' (1996c: 20), which he then, in his last book, *Lebensanschauung (The view of life)*, restricted to the 'great functions of the spirit' or 'worlds' – artistic creation, religious belief, knowledge and the ethics of the 'individual law' (1999a: 237-238)⁷.

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Erlebnis is the 'tinged' or 'coloured' response of a particular disposition to the 'world contents', which are then to be formed according to particular form-giving, objectivating principles (Simmel 1995a: 48, 2003b: 28). But 'historical reality, tied to the conditions of the times' (1996c: 21) always restricts the possibility of modes of objectivation able to retain the integrated, unified character of *Erlebnis* – this is the well-known theme of 'The Concept and Tragedy of Culture', and individual lives pass through different 'worlds' without being able to integrate these fragments. The coincidence of *Erlebnis* and objectivation, of reception and creation, rather appears as a horizon. The philosopher comes closest to that horizon, to that 'third' between individual subjectivity and a supposed universal objectivity, through his typical spirituality (1996c: 28).

But such coincidence is fully realised in the genius, epitomized by Goethe, for Simmel as for the previous and following generations of German philosophers⁸. Goethe saw his own creativity as 'served by the lived experience of reality', since 'reception (*Aufnehmen*) and creative work (*Schaffen*) immediately transformed into the unity of his life-process' (Simmel 2003b: 26). Through the figure of the philosopher, and that of the genius, Simmel expressed the longing for an objectivation of *Erlebnis* able to render *Erlebnis* fully, as integrated and unified experience of the world, in each moment. This is what guided him in the development of an ethics of the 'individual law' for the modern soul, whereby, as he already indicated in the *Main problems*, the 'typicality of a spiritual individuality, the inward objectivity of a personality who only obeys its own law throughout, is effective' (1996c: 29). In the following section, we illustrate Simmel's own path towards the notion of individual law and the horizon of the 'third realm' through his exploration from within of the modern man's 'soul processes' (*Seelenvorgänge*)¹¹ in the money economy, so as to prepare for our summing up in section 3 of the stance towards the world defining Simmel's philosophy.

2 – 'Remoteness from oneself' of the modern soul, alienation and reconciliation

Simmel clearly announced his purpose in the Preface: the *Philosophy of Money* is an exploration of the meaning of the 'totality' of life by means of the investigation of the phenomenon of money and its reciprocal relations with the inner world of human beings. It is not the analysis of the significance of the money economy for the shaping of modern man and culture which a Weberian approach would, perhaps, have entailed,

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But coming back to our account of the philosophical attitude and its status in Simmel's work as a whole, we can formulate the hypothesis that philosophy supplanted history as 'science of reality', or, put differently, that history, as 'science of reality', became fully absorbed by Simmel's philosophy of life¹⁰. Thus it is philosophical, rather than historical, explorations that Simmel quickly most sought to foster and harness, as the counterpart to his psychological and sociological studies. ¶
Simmel's great investigation in the phenomenon of money and its meaning for modern life, for example, started with a 'psychology of money' (1889) in which he addressed the mental characteristics actualised through the money economy, and distinguished 'blaséness' as a particular condition of the well-off strata, evidencing a loss of individuality (1889: 1258)(1889, p. 1258)(1889: 1258). In 1903 he would take up and develop the psychological approach to the phenomenon of money by highlight[... [1]

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nor is it the unveiling of reification which Georg Lukács would have liked it to be. Yet
Simmel's portrait of modern man under the rule of material culture set out inner loss of
oneself and hyper-subjectivity in an unparalleled way. What was the status of this
analysis? What attitude towards the world originated it and what are the implications
of such an attitude?

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In the *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel suggested that money, from 'absolute means', had
become 'absolute end', relegating all values – including 'wisdom and art, personal
significance and strength, indeed beauty and love' (1989b: 312) – to means. Thus,
money imposes its 'forms' (exchange) onto all realms and, as all 'flux', seeks to
dissolve all other forms. This encroachment, and the resulting 'levelling brought about
by a socio-technical mechanism' most vividly sketched by Simmel in his 1903 essay on
'The Metropolis and mental life' (1957b: 227), goes together with 'counter-tendencies'
bringing about the entrenchment of a closed subjectivity:

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'And therefore now that these counter-tendencies have been coined, they may strive for the
ideal of absolutely pure separation, where every material content of life becomes ever more
matter of fact and impersonal, so that the non-reifiable (*nicht zu verdinglichende*) remainder
becomes all the more personal and all the more indisputably the property of the I' (1989b:
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The latter sparked off Lukács' ire (Lukács 1971: 156-157), but perhaps wrongly so, if
we interpret this tendency strictly as the closure upon the self and the search for one's
own subjectivity pointed out by Simmel as the corollary of the mechanisation of the
world¹²: Simmel's ideal was not one of self-enclosed quest of the personality, even
where it led to 'the subject's refinement, distinctiveness and turn to the inward
(*Verinnerlichung*)' (1989b: 653) but, as we have suggested, one of unity in
objectivation. Thus, in this line of analysis, the money economy encroaches upon all
cultural areas and 'reifies' them (the quote above is one of the very few occasions in
which Simmel uses the term¹³). What is not reified, what does not become a pure
mechanism, is pushed back into the depths of subjectivity.

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Indeed Simmel developed in that context an analysis of extreme 'remoteness' from
oneself which he did not call alienation, but which in effect put forward the
consequences of the modern money economy, its encroachments and its bloated
material culture, on the inner make up of the personality: his well-known analysis of
'blasé-ness' (*Blasiertheit*). But alongside what he considered a 'limit case', he portrayed

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2 the more general modern personality as split by an 'insuperable barrier... between itself
3 and what is most authentic and essential in it'. But, in order to be 'remote from oneself'
4 (*aus sich selbst entfernt*), this 'belonging-to-oneself' (*Sich-Selbst-Gehören*), this 'most
5 authentic, most essential' being must still exist as such, somewhere, and must not have
6 completely surrendered to the domination of the 'thousands of habits, thousands of
7 distractions, thousands of needs of a superficial kind' (1989b: 674), as is the case with
8 the blasé man. Only if there remains something to be remote from is it possible to
9 conceive that,

14 'the spirituality and composure of the soul, drowned under the loud splendour of the
15 scientific-technical age, takes revenge under the guise of an obscure feeling of tension and
16 disoriented longing (*Sehnsucht*)' (1989b: 675).

19 *Sehnsucht* is here meant as a longing or nostalgia for meaning – the missing meaning of
20 one's life. It is vague and 'disoriented', a form of 'secret disquiet, restless urgency',
21 stemming from the loss of a 'definite centre for the soul', which, as much as the
22 development of the intellect, both originates in and further spurs the pace and
23 stimulation of modern life (1989b: 674-675). Although Simmel did not use the term in
24 the *Philosophy of Money*, we know from his later writings that this is a longing for that
25 primary human state of *Erleben*, where the personality is at one with itself and the
26 world.

31 But this very lack (through loss) of an inner centre, this permanent imbalance, which
32 causes such 'disquiet' and 'longing' yet also pushes one to ever more and ever renewed
33 pursuits, is, for Simmel, a kind of tension which resonates with the pulse of modern life.

36 Indeed this constant tension besetting the modern individual provides him/her, if he/she
37 is able to withstand it, with the 'momentum of interiority' (1989b: 674). It is movement
38 which is determining here, and partial, momentary, syntheses between one's interiority
39 and the world of objects may take place, subordinated to that movement:

43 'the meaning of life is absolutely not to obtain in reality the continuity of reconciled
44 conditions for which it strives' (1989b: 674).

47 We discern here, in these crucial pages of the last section of the 'Style of life', a
48 perspective on modern culture which helps us understand better the kind of 'paths from
49 the soul to itself' that can subsist when the soul is confronted to an objective culture
50 turned into 'congealed spirit', [pointed out in the opening paragraphs of the 1911 essay](#)

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2 | on 'The Concept and Tragedy of Culture' (1996a: 385), as the reciprocal action between
3 material objective and subjective culture here takes the form of perpetual imbalance and
4 shifting (Jankélévitch 1988: 28). In this perpetual imbalance, a contact between
5 objective and subjective culture is still maintained, as the disquiet and restlessness felt
6 by the subject, his/her longing, stem from the very restlessness of modern life and
7 further fuel it.
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11 One has therefore to ask whether this longing, this *Sehnsucht* of the Simmelian subject,
12 which Weber saw as evidence of the attempt to escape from confronting the world, was
13 not, in Simmel's understanding of it, what allows for the reciprocal action between the
14 material objective and inner subjective world to be preserved in a world whose
15 'tragedy' is the seemingly ever widening rift between subjective and objective logics
16 (1996a). As the 'blasé' attitude, with which it can quite conceivably alternate in one and
17 the same individual, it involves an 'atrophy of individual culture' (1957b: 241). But, at
18 the same time, Simmel seemed to suggest that, contrary to the pure 'blasé' attitude
19 which simply organises subjectivity through its 'internalisation of the money economy'
20 and hence total submission to objective culture, this disquiet and restlessness perhaps
21 epitomize a new culture more at one with the movement of life. Indeed, Simmel saw the
22 'interactive realities (*Wechselwirksamkeiten*)' of the *Philosophy of Money* as 'contents
23 of a relativism that now no longer signified the sceptical melting into air of all that is
24 solid, but precisely the prevention of the same by means of a new concept of solidity',
25 as he reflected in an undated 'beginning of an unfinished self-presentation' (1958: 9)¹⁴.
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34 Simmel's quest for the unveiling of meaning turned him away from an analysis of the
35 encroachments of money on all spheres of life as analysis of the reification of relations,
36 and thus away from a critique of contemporary capitalism, and rather led him to
37 subsume this analysis under a more general understanding of money as symbol of life
38 and its endless dynamic of form-giving and form-submerging. Money is both 'the
39 carrier of a movement in which everything that is not movement is completely
40 dissolved, ... so to speak [an] *actus purus*...' and, 'what is most constant, ... the point
41 of indifference and compensation between all other contents of this world, whose ideal
42 meaning is, as that of the law, to give their measure to all things without measuring
43 itself to them' (1989b: 305). Money is, in each moment, the confluence of the
44 contraries, movement and constancy, indifference and value¹⁵. But the value of money,
45 by measuring all things, contributes to the very dissolution of all values and forms that
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the movement of money as flux also entails – that is why Simmel talks about an anti-individualism of money, money is close to pure movement which does away with particularisation.

Money thus seemed one of these instances which opened up to the third realm which Simmel called for, ‘in the coming epoch’, a realm which was not one of synthesis or reconciliation between opposed concepts of life, but a path in which ‘life’ would take over and flow through contradictions (1995b: 165-166)¹⁶. Simmel regularly referred to such an imagined realm in which life would submerge every single act or experience – a realm in which life would take over to such extent that it would even dissolve individuality, leading to an ultimate generality and typifying of life as pure movement and therefore evading ‘the ultimate individual differentiation... [through] an anti-individualist form’ (1957a: 157). As Lilyane Deroche-Gurcel has pointed out in her analysis of Simmel and modernity, in Simmel’s eyes, Rodin’s statues prefigured such a realm (Deroche-Gurcel 1997: 300): their individual contours are blurred as they are swept by movement, and as they are ‘dragged into the infinity of emergence and destruction’, and ‘constantly stand at the point where becoming and demise meet’, ‘giving up each substance and unity of life to the mere moment of absolute becoming’ (Simmel 2003c: 445, 2005: 105).

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Simmel’s third realm is similarly a realm of pure movement, in which the self-transcendence of life is so continuous that form is constantly on the brink of being dissolved into flux. Whereas, as we had suggested in section 1, philosophy had supplanted history in the exploration of meaning, the historian, in Simmel’s last works, seemed to himself supplant the philosopher in the capacity to be a mere vector of the supra-individual movement of life - but perhaps this is, precisely, Simmel’s own ‘typical [philosophical] spirituality’:

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‘The rhythm, the constant movement of life is the formal carrier of understanding (*Verständnis*)... However, the actual, effective liveliness of this ideal subject is a transformation or objectivation of that very same [liveliness] which we sense in ourselves but into a supra-individual [liveliness], for which we are but an example as it were.’ (1999b: 175-176)

Indeed we would argue that such aspiration to being constantly on the border of complete submerging of form by life is Simmel’s own peculiar mystic quest, whereby

merging into the One is always ahead, as well as behind, and life a perpetual imbalance so as to preserve this overall encompassing equilibrium.

Thus, coming back to the figure of the troubled and longing man of the modern money economy, it seems to us, paradoxically, that, by immersing the momentary reconciliations allowed between subjectivity and objects into restless movement, Simmel pointed to the possibility of a 'reconciliation' at a higher level, a reconciliation and unity with the movement of 'life' as such.

But then this meant an anchoring of the idea of individual unity in that of life: Simmel undertook this task in the last two chapters of his last book (*Lebensanschauung*), in which the 'individual law', that is to say the objectivation and typifying of oneself according to the 'idea' of oneself, is shown to be found in every instant of one's life, for 'life does not reserve a somehow separable "purity" and being for itself beyond the beat of its pulse' (2003c: 314, 2005: 6). As Simmel explained in the foregoing chapter on 'Death and Immortality', this idea of oneself, contained in each single moment of our lives, acquires its objectivity, that is to say its permanency, in the definition of each moment by the sure event of our death: 'in every single moment of life we are those who will die' (Simmel 1999a: 299). The ideas of individual law and of death as process thus enabled Simmel to preserve the idea of the unity of existence (as a never to be reached horizon) whilst acknowledging its relentless changeability.

This meant demanding permanent tension from life in the world as, so to speak, proof of life: but a tension that was antithetic to the tension required, for example, in Weberian life conduct; a tension of equilibrium through permanent imbalance, an 'immobile dialectic' (Léger 1989: 323), rather than a tension born from taking stances in the world and pushing back the boundaries of the possible.

3 – Simmel's philosophical stance toward the world and its relevance to address our time

This section is a recapitulation and further exploration of Simmel's philosophical stance toward the world done with a view to position it in the context of twentieth century philosophy and to provide an initial appraisal of its relevance to address our times. Simmel's philosophical stance, that 'spiritual attitude toward the world and life' (Simmel 1996b: 162) which for him constitutes the essential aspect of philosophy, has

to be situated in line with romanticism or, rather, at the crossroads, or the in-between, formed by the romantic tradition and certain elements of Kantian philosophy which allowed it to resist the romantic way while being profoundly inspired by it. It is a line with a strong anti-Cartesian thrust foreshadowed by Nietzsche and Bergson, extended in Germany through the cult of the genius and the poet, and continued in diverse ways by Heidegger and his followers, as well as by Deleuze. We contend that it is the Simmelian stance what above all accounts for the huge and profound, but often unrecognised, influence of Simmel's thought on twentieth century scholarship and philosophy; and that if this influence, over and above the well-known partial uses of Simmel in the social sciences, has been considered difficult to discern (e.g. Goodstein 2002), it is because we usually tend to overlook or take for granted not only Simmel's stance toward the world, but also our own.

Actually it has not been sufficiently or at all realized that fundamental, defining components of the Simmelian stance are to a very large extent shared not only with Bergson and other life philosophies very different from Simmel's such as Deleuze's, but with the phenomenological *cum* hermeneutical and deconstructive currents as well¹⁷.

Recapitulating the components of Simmel's philosophical stance towards the world which have emerged from our analysis of his philosophical attitude and of his ethics, we find, underpinning it all, a profound yearning or longing (akin to the romantic *Sehnsucht*). This is what triggers, secondly, a quest for a third realm of constant movement, i.e. of constant self-transcendence of life, that typically becomes a finite sphere of the in-between deployed in the infinite conceived of as a temporal horizon. Thirdly, the attempt to develop a new mode of thinking, which characterises every philosophy proper, takes, in Simmel's case, the form of a sustained effort to go beneath and beyond purely discursive, conceptual thought, deemed inadequate to grasp the pulse of life. Finally, Simmel's philosophical stance towards the world puts a strong emphasis on, in his terms, human limitedness or, in current philosophical parlance, finitude, that is, the idea that each moment of our life is determined by the certainty of our death. The importance of these elements, which are closely interrelated and articulated within the Simmelian stance, goes much beyond the pastimes consisting in post-modernising Simmel and playing games with fragments, fluidity and nomadic subject positions, as is done in characteristic post-modern fashion by Deena and Michael Weinstein (1993). Indeed such elements, particularly Simmel's attempt at unveiling the contours and

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3 depths of life moments and fragments, as well as its constant movement, strikes
4 intensely many a postmodern chords and would seem to provide contemporary
5 disjointed and restless identities with a comforting feeling of reassurance. Much more
6 importantly, they are at the core of an entire philosophical line in the twentieth century,
7 where they were deployed to extremes that Simmel, to the extent that he could envisage
8 them, refused to follow.

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11 As Jankélévitch (1988: 14) has argued, Simmel's work is pervaded by the *Sehnsucht*
12 'atmosphere' that prevailed in Germany at the time; not only does his work somehow
13 translate such atmosphere, but this very *Sehnsucht* is also what constitutes the
14 motivating force and impulse of Simmel's thought. As we have seen in section 2, it is 'a
15 feeling of tension, expectation, unresolved longing' (1992: 189) produced by a peculiar
16 way of processing the uneasiness or distress over modern civilisation and its
17 rationalising, mechanical workings. Simmel interprets it as the soul's revenge against
18 modern conditions (Simmel 1989b: 675); yet Simmel's philosophical longing is neither
19 reactive nor aimless, but active and directed to envisaging and grasping a third realm
20 able to contain the very pulse of life in its profound dynamism. But as Badiou (1998)
21 has pointed out concerning Deleuze and as is the case of any such attempt, the
22 movement of life is a version of the One (here named 'life'; in other philosophies
23 'substance', 'whole' or 'all') whose deployment or movement is not thinkable in its
24 pure being but only as an in-between of two movements, whether of objectivation and
25 subjectivation (Simmel) or, in terms by no means alien to Simmel, of actualisation and
26 virtualisation (Deleuze)¹⁸. Yet, these two movements are nothing but two new versions
27 of the One. Life thus appears suspended between itself as a weak variant of life and
28 itself as a strong variant of life, with the result that pure, inconsistent multiplicity or
29 multiplicity without one (Badiou, see below) is denied or at any rate not graspable
30 through experiential understanding, no matter how seismographically accurate, to
31 paraphrase Gadamer's apposite reference to Simmel (Gadamer 2004: 55), experiential
32 descriptions are. This endless dwelling on the infinite diversity of life may easily give
33 the impression that multiplicity is not simply what there is (Badiou), but what there
34 should be and therefore what should be promoted (post-modern view).

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48 The construction of an in-between involves a further determination in thought whereby
49 it appears as a permanent horizon of becoming. In this sense Simmel's is, as we have
50 suggested, a mystical longing for fusion with the very movement of life which, as he
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2 insists once and again, knows perfectly well that no rest is possible as long as there is
3 life, yet seeks to reach the highest possible harmony with it. Here lies what we might
4 call the paradox and the courage of the Simmelian stance, which held firmly to that
5 almost impossible and hardly bearable position that we have called 'equilibrium through
6 permanent imbalance', and strove to give its due, without conceding any primacy, to
7 both objectivation and subjectivation. Simmel's faithfulness to his conception of life
8 went as far as making his *Sehnsucht* oscillate, as Jankélévitch aptly observes (1988: 78),
9 between immanence and transcendence. This oscillation is another version of the
10 experiential construction of the in-between which, as we have just highlighted, involves
11 a horizontal dimension consisting in the temporal deployment of the historicity of
12 finitude or, in a more Simmelian language, of the fundamental limitedness of human
13 existence.
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16 The profound connections of the Simmelian stance with Heidegger's, amply
17 commented in the literature, can be made manifest as soon as we recall the weighty
18 Heideggerian themes and figures of finitude, being-for-death, and meditative or poetic
19 (that is, for Heidegger, non philosophical) thinking. In his own peculiar way, Heidegger
20 himself recognised Simmel's influence, if not publicly, at least to his student
21 Gadamer.¹⁹ Most significantly, Simmel's mystical longing becomes an unmistakable
22 flight from the world in Heidegger's stance, as can be seen by considering the figure
23 *par excellence* of Heideggerian mysticism: the no-longer and not-yet time of waiting for
24 the re-sacralisation of the earth or the re-enchantment of the world; as Heidegger put it
25 in his last intervention in 1966, after famously declaring that 'only a God can still save
26 us', it is a time of waiting in 'preparation of the readiness, of keeping oneself open for
27 the arrival of or the absence of the god' (2003: 38-39). We need not mention here other,
28 similar attitudes, such as Derrida's eschatological positing of a perpetually deferred
29 horizon of the '*toujours à venir*' (always to come). Let us only add that these are the
30 kind of attitudes that Weber observed in Germany and admonished against at the end of
31 *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, where he summoned his audience to act differently, instead of
32 simply yearning and waiting.
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35 Weber's warning could not be more fitting, for it is about politics, that is, precisely what
36 Simmel did not recognise as an autonomous realm or world. Indeed Simmel considered,
37 in perfect consonance with his apolitical position, that the different realms are parallel
38 worlds, not in struggle or in tension, since the rift is between life and its petrification or
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between different intensities of life. In truth none of the philosophical currents we have mentioned here recognises politics as an autonomous realm. In Simmel's (here again, not isolated) case, this non recognition of politics has to be considered alongside the extraordinary importance he granted to religion, together with the aesthetic sphere. In this respect one has to acknowledge that the critiques – e.g. by Weber, Lukács and more recently by Coletti (1979) and Habermas (1996) – of Simmel and his philosophy as leading to escape from the world and lacking commitment have a point. Our own objection to the Simmelian stance concerns both philosophy and politics. Firstly, such stance is very problematic for philosophy in that it may easily lead to a philosophically unacceptable blend of philosophy (that is, the quest for truth which relies on the human mind on its own, unaided or unhindered by revelation and presence, and is rationally accessible and transmissible) and religion, or philosophy and the quest for spiritual supplements, – a danger particularly acute today, after the proclamation of the end of history and without a strong alternative, emancipatory politics clearly in sight. Simmel's hesitation, brought out in section 1, between a unity which is philosophically constructed and a unity which is pre-theoretically received in *Erlebnis* and philosophically objectivated points to this affinity between philosophy and religion. This hesitation comes very much to the fore when Simmel leaves it open, as practically all life philosophies and all philosophical currents in quest for some kind of presence or unity have tended to do, as to whether mysticism (which he approaches through Meister Eckhart) should be considered to pertain to philosophy or not since both connect 'the deepest submersion in ourselves' with 'the absolute unity of things' through a 'point' at which 'this unity' (of existence, of God) 'reveal[s] itself (*sich offenbarte*) as our essence and unity' (1996c: 16). The revelation of an 'intuited' unity of existence brings philosophy very close indeed to religion – and leads us to question the status of such thought as philosophy²⁰.

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Secondly, the Simmelian stance seems perfectly compatible, and many uses of Simmel would seem to confirm this, with sheer conformism and adaptation to the world. It is only too evident that both aspects, this form of philosophising referred to above and mere adaptation to the world, can and do go very well together. Simmel himself, for example, did not doubt to adopt the quite widespread view of the war as a moment which could help re-establishing vital connections between the individual human being (more concretely here: the soldier) and the overall course of events, so that 'people who

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have experienced (*erlebt*) the overcoming of [this tension between subjective and objective cultures] on the battlefield may perhaps also feel the significance of their other anonymous, partial contributions more clearly and in a so to speak more personal way' (Simmel 1917: 63). And we have shown in section 2 that, although Simmel assessed the restlessness of the modern, caused by the de-centring of the 'soul' assaulted by material culture, as 'remoteness from oneself', his philosophy and ethics suggested that we should become sensitive to the higher reconciliation with modern life that such remoteness from oneself implied. The search for meaning takes shape, at the individual level, in an ethics that claims each moment of life as a moment of our own life: although involving permanent tension, it is a tension related to making sense of what there is, without suggesting any take on 'reality'. This stands in the sharpest contrast with a thought as pervaded by politics as Weber's, for whom a 'science of reality' (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*), far from lying in uncovering meaning, should direct the gaze of contemporary and future readers and listeners to the 'inconvenient fact' that *they themselves* have to create meaning (1988b: 154) and confront a world of struggle between deadly opposed values and conceptions of the world, which they play out in their choices and non-choices whether they want it or not (1988a: 507).

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By way of conclusion

Simmel's philosophical stance toward the world could be described as a meditative immersion in life done with a view to gain meaning. In such a stance the world appears as constituted of different layers of experience, to be both experienced (rather than savoured) and organically integrated in the deployment of one's own life from the idea and pulse of life of which one is the carrier. The world is thus left totally untouched while the self struggles to find unity and ultimately to fuse with life. We would like to suggest that it is this unmistakable mystical thrust what constitutes the charm of Simmel's thought for what has been called 'postmodernity' and that beneath and beyond the fragments, and the reassuring sanction of one's being and identities they seem to provide, there lies the yearning for the One – a yearning that grows from a prior twofold abdication which is simultaneously reinforced by it, namely: abdication before death or the resigned conception of Man as a finite being destined to die, and abdication before the world or the delusory idea that politics has been overcome, or at any rate has no importance. This is how a paradigmatic breeding ground for the worst kinds of

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2 politics is provided, while the postmodern age issues its (anti-Simmelian) injunction to
3 *jouissance*, the compulsion to enjoy the fragments, the passing moments and the errant
4 subject positions.
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7 Those who take Simmel seriously ~~will probably recognise that the possibilities of~~
8 Simmel's philosophy have in different ways been amply explored in the twentieth
9 century, particularly by Heidegger and his followers, and that it is probably not possible
10 to go beyond them. But today's philosophical situation, in our view, which very much
11 differs from Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen's (2008), is not any longer dominated by
12 Heidegger's thought and its motive of 'the end' (the end of philosophy, of grand
13 narratives, of the subject). It cannot be, since there is an open confrontation with another
14 philosophy, that of Alain Badiou (1988, 1998), which defines itself in radical departure
15 from the philosophical landscape occupied by Heidegger and his followers, whilst
16 recognising that some of its insights and ideas are indispensable. This new situation is
17 one in which, to put it in a nutshell, philosophy 'has started again', the 'end of all ends'
18 has been proclaimed, the categories of 'truth' and 'subject' have been reconstructed and
19 all quests for meaning, unification with metaphysical entities, returns and re-
20 enchantments have been declared religious or mystical.
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23 To live, to lead a true human life for Badiou (2006) is to incorporate oneself into a
24 subject or to devote oneself to a true (for all) cause, to the point of – as Max Weber,
25 many years before Badiou, did not hesitate to add – 'perish[ing] in the calling' (1920:
26 548).
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for dilettantes

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¹ Rudolph Weingartner also argues that Simmel's philosophy of life weaves together the many threads of his work (Weingartner 1962). And Hans Blumenberg asks 'whether Georg Simmel would ever have struck a chord with his "Philosophy of Money" had he not gone on to invent the philosophy of life' (Blumenberg 2011).

² As per the subtitle to his 1890 *On social differentiation*.

³ When accounting for the selection by the historian of his subject, Simmel prefers the notion of significance that engages the historian's affects, that touches his imagination, to Rickert's purely logical notion of value-relation (Léger 1989: 165-168).

⁴ The notion of 'synthesis of imagination' stands close to the key Diltheyan idea of 'imaginative metamorphosis' explored in the *Poetics* (1887) (Makkreel 1975: 102). Both Dilthey and Simmel have an aesthetic approach to *Erlebnis*, and both were inspired by Goethe in this. It is important to stress that this dramatically distinguishes *Verstehen* from immediate empathy. For both Dilthey and Simmel, and against

for example Hugo Münsterberg or Bergson, understanding is always achieved through the mediation of objects without which there can be no science, only introspection (Darmon 2011: 25-27).

⁵ The soul (*Seele*) may be defined as the seat of our personality, and as both nourished by – and itself colouring – our experience of and relation to the world, by opposition to reason (*Verstand*), the mind (*Geist*), the seat of conceptual, analytical thought (Simmel 1957b: 230, 1996a: 386-387).

⁶ The axiom of absence of presuppositions, which Simmel posits for philosophical thinking at the very beginning of his *Main Problems*, clarifies the status of the ‘philosophical disposition’ as immanent in philosophical thinking, and not as an a priori condition.

⁷ Simmel treats the philosophical *Weltanschauungen* and the moulding of the ‘fabric of the world’ by the great functions of the spirit into separate, autonomous, parallel worlds, as two comparable but distinct processes. And it is thus not clear where philosophy stands in relation to Simmel’s ‘ontological worlds’.

⁸ Joseph Bleicher has shown the centrality of Goethe’s figure for the attack that was waged in the name of life against all ‘mechanism’ (Bleicher 2007).

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¹¹ Birgitta Nedelmann draws the attention on the term in her analysis of Simmel’s notion of blaseness (*Blasiertheit*) (Nedelmann 1990: 232).

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¹² As per Simmel’s diary entry: “Perhaps in our current life, there is on the one hand too much “I” (“ich”), and too much mechanism on the other hand” (2004a: 264).

Deleted: in her view, but she uses it for both the analysis of the ‘Metropolis’ essay and that of the *Philosophy of Money*. She distinguishes the two analyses, but on other counts than the distinction between Simmel’s philosophical and psychological approach

¹³ David Frisby comments on the allegedly frequent use of ‘reification (*Verdinglichung*)’ by Simmel, whereas *Verdinglichung* or terms with the same root only appear 3 times in the CD of Simmel’s works, admittedly all in the *Philosophy of Money*. But Frisby and Bottomore translate the most diverse array of expressions (e.g. *Substanzierung* –substantialisation, *Verkörperung*, embodiment, *Wirklichkeit* – reality – alongside *Verdinglichung*) as ‘reification’. See Simmel (2004b: 20).

¹⁴ Elizabeth Goodstein accepts Simmel’s argument and considers that Simmel’s relativism constituted a new way of thinking. Yet in her conclusion she seems to forget about the idea of movement which is central to Simmel’s relativism and to his idea of third realm, and to locate his contemporary relevance in the *contents* of relations, i.e. in the ‘specific epistemic and ethical dilemmas’ ‘lived out by modern subjects in the forms of life described by Simmel (Goodstein 2002: 217, 230). Simmel’s relativism is better understood, as pointed out by François Léger, as ‘relationism’ (Léger 1989: 25), a term also taken up by Olli Pyyhtinen (2010). This passage is also discussed by Hans Blumenberg in the essay translated for this special issue.

¹⁵ As noted by many commentators, Simmel likened money and its effect on values to Nicolas de Cusa’s vision of God as *coincidentia oppositorum*.

¹⁶ Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen also note the crucial importance of the notion of the ‘domain of the third’ for Simmel’s philosophy and work as a whole. They similarly associate it with movement, referring e.g. to the conclusion of Simmel’s essay on *Kant and Goethe*, where he imagines a third realm in which neither

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4 of their *Weltanschauung* would triumph, but which would rather be a domain of 'development of their
5 standpoints in infinite reciprocity' (Lehtonen & Pyyhtinen 2008: 305). The essay on Kant and Goethe is
6 crucial for a proper understanding of Simmel's turn to the philosophy of life. On that point see also
7 Bleicher (2007) and Levine (2008).
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10 ¹⁷ However Gary Backhaus edited a set of three papers in *Human Studies* in 2003, as an exploration of the
11 relation of Simmel's philosophy of history to phenomenology (Backhaus 2003).

12 ¹⁸ This compares with Simmel's reference to actualisation and potentiality in the essay on 'The Concept
13 and Tragedy of Culture' (Simmel 1996a: 388).

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15 ¹⁹ 'As early as 1923, Heidegger spoke to me with admiration of the late writings of Georg Simmel. This
16 was not just a general acknowledgment of Simmel as a philosophical personality. The specific stimulus
17 that Heidegger had received from his work will be apparent to anyone who today reads, in the first of the
18 four "Metaphysical Chapters" gathered together under the title *Lebensanschauung*, what the dying
19 Simmel conceived as his philosophical task' (Gadamer 2004: 264).
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22 ²⁰ For a different view on the implications of the relation between religion and philosophy (or science) in
23 Simmel's thought as compared with Weber's, see Harrington (2010).
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7 But coming back to our account of the philosophical attitude and its status in Simmel's
8 work as a whole, we can formulate the hypothesis that philosophy supplanted history as
9 'science of reality', or, put differently, that history, as 'science of reality', became fully
10 absorbed by Simmel's philosophy of lifeⁱ. Thus it is philosophical, rather than historical,
11 explorations that Simmel quickly most sought to foster and harness, as the counterpart to
12 his psychological and sociological studies.
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18 Simmel's great investigation in the phenomenon of money and its meaning for modern
19 life, for example, started with a 'psychology of money' (1889) in which he addressed the
20 mental characteristics actualised through the money economy, and distinguished
21 'blaséness' as a particular condition of the well-off strata, evidencing a loss of
22 individuality (1889: 1258)(1889, p. 1258)(1889: 1258). In 1903 he would take up and
23 develop the psychological approach to the phenomenon of money by highlighting a
24 'metropolitan type of individuality' (1957b: 228)(1957b, p. 228)(1957b: 228), whose
25 distinct features of internal psychic organisation (amongst which blaséness) in response
26 to the 'external stimuli' are shared by those pertaining to this type. But, in between these
27 two essays comes the monumental *Philosophy of Money* (1900, revised in 1907). Its
28 approach to the blasé human being and more generally modern man under the money
29 economy is that of an
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46 ⁱ At least until Simmel's conception of the historical attitude had come so close to the philosophical one
47 that we can say that his philosophy of history had become absorbed by his philosophy of life (i.e. in his
48 three last essays in the philosophy of history (Simmel 1999b, 2000, 2003a)(Simmel, 1999b, 2000,
49 2003a)(Simmel, 1999b, 2000, 2003a).
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