The Individual and Society

Georg Simmel’s Ethic and Epistemology

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Ethic of Individuality and the Problems of Modern Culture

Simmel observes that the individual minds, or selves – as G. H. Mead would say – have attained a level of development in the history of culture, at which they see themselves removed from the world as objective reality and as it were confronting it. This applies to the law, to religion, to various customs, in sum to culture that constitutes the objective mind (objekter Geist; Simmel 1949: 311). The persons are indeed still the bearers of the objective mind, and the institutions are acknowledged as existing legitimately, regardless of how well they serve the individuals subjected to their influence.

On the other hand the individual persons experience within themselves each their own life, and have a sense of responsibility with regard to that inner life. This constitutes the confrontation mentioned above between the need to contribute toward the continuity of objective culture on the one hand and the responsibility for protecting and developing the potentials of one’s personal life on the other as ethic of individuality. Simmel mentions as illustration for the commanding stringency of culture the artist who can only perform under conditions of total devotion (Hingabe, see Wolff 1995), and on the individual side the person who follows his or her conscience in accordance with the inner life as an ongoing project (Simmel 1949: 311).

Faced with this confrontation Simmel sees the temptation – not for himself but for others like Fichte and Tolstoi – to take sides against culture and for the individual. He deplores the view of confrontation between the two and admires Goethe in whom he sees a personal synthesis between culture and individual morality. What matters here is not, if Simmel was right in this or not, but rather that he did indeed see it that way. In any case he recommends as his normative recommendation a compromise according to which objective values of culture ought to be internalized by individuals so they can contribute toward guiding their personal lives, and concomitantly for subjective guiding principles to become incorporated into the objective culture of an epoch (ibid.: 312).

Simmel expects modernity to supply the conditions that make it possible for the group to socialize the individual into becoming its member, while at the same time for the individual to defend the uniqueness of his or her inner life even against the impositions of the group to which he or she may be deeply indebted for having become an independent person. While Simmel likes to see that as a process of compromise between culture and
person, he admits that since the 18th century the emphasis was on individualization. He is critical of Rousseau who found the culture to do violence against the person, and he is critical of Fichte and Kant who tended to look at culture simply as a creation of the person. In order to base his critique of those greats on a solid foundation Simmel finds it helpful to think in sociological terms when deliberating a modern ethic.

He sees in individualization both the liberation from the narrow, rather provincial realm of social relationships that provide security because of their limited number, as well as the basis for initiating contacts with human beings who live far away, with the tendency towards a cosmopolitan or global orientation. To him the concept of a world society of humankind – as if it were a cosmopolitan value – is the consequence of an individuality that is ever more widely extended.

By no longer reflecting predominantly on memberships in groups within easy reach, a person does not identify primarily as belonging to this province or that city but rather as that incomparable, unique individual that only he or she is; to the extent to which this orientation prevails – so the implicit hope of Simmel – humankind will grow towards a society that is cosmopolitan in orientation. This process of cultivation, carried by very individual qualities in every human being, allows a decline in the importance of those mutual exchanges which are organized on a small-scale basis, i.e., with a provincial value-overtone, and the rise of the feeling of being allied with all people of the world regardless of where they live.

Of course, such change takes time, and comes about only slowly and in consecutive stages. The two-volume introduction to moral science (Simmel 1989; 1991) is important for understanding the continuity in Simmel’s thinking. In these volumes he outlines his concept of ethic and combines it with his theory of evolution in society as the transition from one stage of development to another. The principle of interaction appears to be the link between individual and social reality.

At the beginning of this project stands the knowledge of a discouraging failure in history. To assume or even dogmatically decree that in a state of natural conditions all humans were equal, was to Simmel an error of devastating proportions. By contrast he states that in the absence of culture, naked nature – if a condition like that can even be imagined – would result in the most brutal form of inequality. He concludes from that more speculative observation the insight into what he calls the tragedy of individual liberty: Should it ever become a reality, it would create in its wake such dramatic inequality that it would immediately have to be revoked and suppressed (Simmel 1949: 313).

What made things worse was that during the 18th century the erroneous idea of innate equality was propagated concurrently with the notion of natural law. Simmel opposes that because natural law makes individuality disappear (ibid.: 314). By arguing along the ideas of natural law people of that century believed, they had discovered what is essentially and truly human and claimed for that to be the nucleus of every person. In the process they created an abstract human being as the object of natural law and of human rights. This is close to Platonic thinking. It deprives the individual of his or her unique and inalienable qualities while reducing the person to a coincidental and peripheral form of existence.