

*Marina V. Rendl*

## **Some Questions to Georg Simmel's Ethics (in his Essay "The Individual Law")**

**Marina Valerievna Rendl** – Doctor of Science in Philosophy (Russia), Doctor of Science in Philosophy (Austria). Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät, Universität Innsbruck. 1 Karl-Rahner-Platz, Innsbruck, 6020, Österreich; e-mail: rendlmv@gmail.com

Georg Simmel's heritage is seldom identified with the subject of ethics. He is mostly considered as a representative of the 'philosophy of life', who didn't make a significant contribution to its development. Some of his works, in which he has worked out a peculiar ethical representation, seem more surprising. This 'popular' ethic is attractive today because it focuses on the real, living person with fragile existence and easy changeable values, ideals and principles. His or her actions don't always correspond to the ethical model, but it doesn't mean that they are unethical. Ethics as a theory doesn't match with ethics as the real practice of human life: this idea represents Simmel's starting point and forms his concept as the ethics of individuality. I would like to discuss some conspicuous problems in Simmel's interpretation of ethics in his essay 'the individual law' as well as his criticism of the general ethics of Immanuel Kant. Simmel asks basic questions that each intelligent person is concerned with: What is the meaning of duty and morality? How should you adapt these categories to your own life? Can a person do something without ethics? The Simmel's solutions are not ideal. They ask for comments. I want to discuss their advantages and disadvantages and see whether Simmel's project can be explained as ethics at all.

**Keywords:** Georg Simmel, ethics, individuality, morality, duty

### **Human individuality as the center of Simmel's ethical theory**

Georg Simmel is considered as one of the founders of modern sociology around the world. His contribution to its development is great, his ideas were crucial to its foundations. However, they can't be reduced to the sociological area only. His

concept is also proving to be productive in philosophy today, but as the philosopher, Simmel is not very well-known<sup>1</sup>. Even less he is considered as ethicist. It's believed that while keeping with his spirit of time, he remained in the status of a philosopher of life and was unable to create a consistent philosophical theory or a significant ethical system.

The cause of this cliché is possibly that in Simmel's theory one separates sociology from philosophy and looks at both of them independently. Someone evaluates the philosophical thoughts of Simmel as secondary and incidental compared to his sociological concept. Simmel-philosopher is 'convicted' to stay in the shadow of Simmel-sociologist. This damages the admission of the great Simmel project, which relates to the inseparable unity of the individual, society, philosophy, culture and ethics. Here, a conclusion can be made that Simmel focuses primarily on human existence. In all of his works he treats the individual as one of the fundamental forces of history. His theory points directly to the fundamental principles of individuality in its mental and physical frailty, in its ethical suspense and in the eternal creative pursuit that can't obtain a stable satisfactory result.

As a society member, Simmel's individual is part of its totality on the one hand, and a totality itself, a sum of the autonomous, unique elements that belong to its personality only, on the other hand. Thus, the individual should play two roles: as part of the whole and as the whole itself. In this way, Simmel brings up one of the most important questions in the ethics: how far should the individual adapt to the whole? How should the individual accept the general norms of ethics if they contradict his or her individuality?

In order to answer this question from the point of view of Simmel's ethics, one should first explain some of the underlying aspects. For this purpose, I am asking those questions which, in my opinion, are important for understanding the philosophical and ethical theory of Simmel and which could contribute to the overall picture of Simmel as an ethicist.

### **1. Could Simmel be viewed as an ethicist? What does individual ethics mean?**

There are very few works by Simmel that belong solely to the field of ethics<sup>2</sup>. But that doesn't mean that Simmel couldn't be considered as an ethicist. The characteristic of Simmel-ethicist is that his ethics should be discovered among many other topics. For example, his works 'The Individual Law', 'The Concept and the Tragedy of Culture', 'The Conflict of Modern Culture' can definitely be interpreted as ones belonging to the field of ethics. In these writings, the questions about society, philosophy, culture, art, ethics and aesthetics are discussed and interrelated.

<sup>1</sup> Simmel's philosophical ideas are represented in such 'classical' and new publications as: *Deml S.* Der Fremde bei Georg Simmel, Alfred Schütz und Robert Park. München, 2003; *Gefßner W.* Der Schatz im Acker. Georg Simmel Philosophie der Kultur. Weilerswist, 2003; *Helle H.J.* Georg Simmel: Introduction to His Theory and Method. Oldenbourg, 2001; *Landmann M.* Georg Simmel: Konturen seines Denkens // Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel. Frankfurt-am-Main, 1976; *Meyer I.* Georg Simmel's Ästhetik: Autonomiepostulat und soziologische Referenz. Weilerswist, 2017, etc. However, the studies of Simmel's philosophy are practically insignificant in relation to the publications about his sociological system.

<sup>2</sup> It's primary about his publication 'Introduction to the Science of Ethics' (Vid.: *Simmel G.* Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft. Eine Kritik der ethischen Grundbegriffe. Berlin, 1892-1893).

This mixture can make a chaotic impression if the guiding principle of the Simmel's concept, the volatility and diversity of human individuality, is not properly perceived. But if one discovers in his texts a certain philosophical and ethical guideline, this makes Simmel's system clear and structured at once. Basically, this system refers to a conflict between the life and the external forms of culture (which also include ethics, philosophy, history, religion) as between the 'individually-living' and the 'objective-static' component<sup>3</sup>. At the center of this conflict, there is the individual, who is supposed to unite both life and culture, but actually remains either on the side of life or on the side of culture. The individual has the intention to pursue and implement his or her own wishes, will and mental abilities with the help of culture. These are objectified and evaluated by culture. However, this is often followed by the alienation of these cultural products of the subject from the subject itself. The 'static' products can no longer correspond to the evolving individuality. The Simmel's individual manifests itself as a fleeting being, whose spirit is looking for an appropriate form of expression in the culture, but doesn't find the one that could satisfy it for a long time. This instability of human existence, the permanent spiritual striving of the individual for culture and the inability to catch the life in its dynamics has led to Simmel's transformation into the sphere of the ethics.

Simmel's ethics reveals itself primarily through this fleeting being of the individual. In this sense, the ethical norms and rules represent an objective cultural product of the subjective spiritual power. Although they were originally constructed by this subject, they can't coincide as objects for a long time with the subject's vitality. Life goes permanently beyond these objective products. This is why the individual perceives the external ethical norms and principles, including duty and morality, as a pure theory, a foreign substance that doesn't touch on the actual course and everyday life of the subject. Simmel asks why it's happening and develops his model of 'individual' ethics in return as a counter-position to the ethical theory that doesn't affect a living individual.

For Simmel, the human individuality in its diversity plays the role of the methodological 'weapon' against the general validity of ethical laws. His article 'The individual law' has as the main point of criticism the conventional ethics as a philosophical, theoretical subject that should justify the universal norms and moral principles. On the one hand, Simmel notes that the idea of the general validity of moral rules is derived from the 'nature' of the subject of ethics. Conventional 'general' ethics looks for metaphysical foundations that are the same and constant for all people, so that one can explain humanity on the basis of ethics as a unified whole. On the other hand, it's difficult to define the moral law because it should be not only theoretical, but also practical and effective for each individual.

<sup>3</sup> Simmel believes that some subjective intentions get objective being and alienate from the subject: "Inhalte sind zwar von Subjekt geschaffen und für Subjekte bestimmt, aber in der Zwischenform der Objektivität, die sie diesseits und jenseits dieser Instanzen annehmen, einer immanenten Entwicklungslogik folgen und sich damit ihrem Ursprung wie ihrem Zweck entfremden" (*Simmel G. Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur // Simmel G. Das individuelle Gesetz. Philosophische Exkurse. Frankfurt-am-Main, 1987. S. 140*).

As a preamble to his 'individual' ethics, Simmel introduces the following argument. The moral law should be adopted equally for rational reason from all people. That's why I need to have this universal moral law as my own role model. I have to fulfil my duty because I am a human and a part of humanity. But I still can't say why this duty is mine and why the general morality should be of importance for me personally. The problem is perhaps that morality should refer to a certain act of a particular individual and can't be important as an abstract concept.

In this way, Simmel replaces the primacy of the ratio to the category of life as a reason of morality. This solution doesn't seem to be new: it can be found everywhere in the philosophy of life, to which Simmel formally belongs. However, the philosophy of life in his version has its own specificity: life is considered not only as a pure vitality, but primarily refers to the creativity of the individual. Life is a spiritual attempt to bring the unstable subjective part of individuality through culture, philosophy and ethics to the world. On this basis, Simmel creates his own variation of the ethics of life as ethics of individuality with its great creative potential and permanent ethical troubles, doubts and questions about duty and morality.

## **2. Why does Simmel criticize Immanuel Kant?**

Simmel's work 'the individual law' shows the great importance of the categorical imperative by Immanuel Kant for his argumentation against the general ethics<sup>4</sup>. One could get the impression that Simmel criticizes Kant in the style of life-philosophers, accordingly accusing him of an exaggerated theoretical idea of ethics. I will try to clarify if this impression is really justified.

The starting point of Simmel's criticism is that the ethics is generally consolidated through its concepts. These concepts (the terms) turn out to be a 'shell' that should bring together its inner content, namely various individual aspects of the human being. The ethical theory assumes that all of these contents are structurally equivalent and could represent a unit under one concept (term). This creates an ethical model that should theoretically apply to every individual. And this doesn't work in practice because the theoretical terms disregard the volatile human-related content of ethics. This content is artificially assigned to the term. The ethical terms seem to be structured and coherent, as they represent the life process theoretically, stable and statically. Thus, the dynamic, inconsistent and partly contradicting core of life process will be avoided. However, this core directly affects the human individuality. In this way everything unique and individual that actually constitutes the human beings is negated and viewed as a minor exception. The subject of conventional ethics produces the abstract concepts but not the concrete principles for real human life.

Simmel regards the categorical imperative of Kant as a concept that is never derived from the individual parts of human nature, but opposes these parts. For Simmel, the general validity of the Kant's ethics stands in opposition to the real living individual. This idea corresponds to the basic ideas of his theory about

---

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant is one of the key figures for Simmel as philosopher. The habilitation of Simmel ('Kantische Studien'. Habilitationsschrift. Berlin, 1885) is also devoted to the Kant's theory. In this article I deliberately concentrate on Simmel's essay 'the individual law' because it clearly shows which points of Kant's ethics are especially problematic for Simmel (namely the categorical imperative).

the world of life and the world of culture. For him, Kant's ethics is only directed towards a rational side of human existence. The other side, the life process, which can't be derived theoretically from ethical norms, is overlooked.

In his idea of general ethics, Kant missed its essence which opens up exceptionally individually because the life can only be embodied in a concrete specific individual form. Kant, with his emphasis on rationality moves away from the individual and its life, offers a serious rational method and treats real human as inanimate material. The life process will be rationalized. The theoretical individual is equated with the real individual. The real individual feels alienated from this theoretical ethic<sup>5</sup>. For the real individual, it's the world of theory in which it actually doesn't live.

Simmel eventually negates that duty is to be deduced from the generality of morality. He wouldn't see the evidence of the general conceptual nature of morality. The concept of morality is confused with its real individual components, which are structurally incoherent, fleeting and contradicting itself like real living humans.

Thus, Simmel's view neglects the real living individual that could completely interfere with the most important function of ethics as a natural consequence of human life. This situation would be fully demonstrated by the Kantian ethics in the form of the categorical imperative. On the one hand, the formulation of the imperative 'act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law'<sup>6</sup> should refer to the individual and its inner principles. On the other hand, this general law doesn't affect the individual as a whole, but only its rational part. As a result, general morality exists parallel to real life. Although it affects the rational, spiritual dimension of human, it remains predominantly alien to the human's temporal fleeting nature.

Simmel agrees that the categorical imperative is a perfectly formulated coherent product of ratio. However, it's possible that not everyone wants to live and act according to this rational model. Finally, non-following the imperative doesn't threaten the real life process. That is why the imperative according to Simmel could not be called a strictly categorical one.

### **3. Is Simmel's criticism of Kantian ethics justified at all?**

It's actually noticeable that Simmel interprets the whole system of moral philosophy and ethics of Kant seemingly one-sidedly. For example, he overlooks the main problem of Kant's ethics, namely the relation of the maxim of the subject's will to the general law. Simmel evaluates this general law of Kant primarily as a theoretical abstraction away from real life. The core of the Kantian imperative, the concept of duty, is viewed peripherally as one of possible clichés of behaviour. Simmel pays attention neither to the basis of the moral law nor to Kant's duty itself. Kant asserted morality primarily in relation to the theoretical individual rather than to the real one.

<sup>5</sup> Therefore Simmel believes that the categorical imperative blocks the subjective freedom of the individual by imposing on him a certain objective form: "Der kategorische Imperativ hebt entsprechend die Freiheit auf, weil er die einheitliche Totalität des Lebens aufhebt, zugunsten der atomisierten Taten, die und deren Wertung nach einem begrifflichen System das Leben unter sich beugen, ihm seine, d.h. ihre Bedeutung bestimmen" (*Simmel G. Das Individuelle Gesetz // Simmel G. Das Individuelle Gesetz. S. 192*).

<sup>6</sup> *Kant I. Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals. Cambridge, 1997. P. 31.*

The same is about the concept of act: Kant would be concerned with the basic ideas of moral act but not with the individual act in its real process of performance.

All these arguments are clear. Kant's theory simply has another focus, which doesn't match the claim of the philosophy of life in the Simmel's version. Simmel reduces the Kantian thesis that the imperative should be general because it extends to all individuals, to just a standard of behaviour, to one of the behaviours clichés.

Nevertheless, from my point of view, Simmel doesn't belong to a large number of critics of Kant's rational-orientated moral philosophy, who negated the rational reasons of morality and opposed Kant's rationality with a nebulous unstructured irrationality. De facto, Simmel is not a superficial critic of the Kantian ethics. 'The individual law' doesn't ultimately lead to the conclusion that he underestimates Kant's ideas. Instead, he emphasises the value of Kantian ethics several times. Simmel's conclusions are not directives, but rather considerations in the style of pro and contra arguments. Its purpose can't be actually described as an uncompromising criticism: Simmel probably wanted to evoke the reflection of the individual on ethics as a fixed system of concepts and make a person think about its own life from the ethics point of view. He didn't want to criticize some theory as in case of Kant, destroy it and use it to justify his own theory. Simmel doesn't want exactly to construct a new moral law that might be better than the Kantian imperative. This would contradict Simmel's basic idea, don't create any new theoretical laws for real human life because as an objectified product, they will be alien to the process of life. He would like to practice the individualization of ethics in contrast to its generalization.

Therefore, Simmel forms his own 'individual' ethics with the 'individual' instead of a general law. This should not be surely understood as the opposite of the Kantian ethics. Simmel's position is ambivalent: after all, he declares himself neither in favor of general ethics nor definitely against it. This ambivalence of argumentation is a special feature of Simmel. For example, he criticizes the concept of morality but however, directly denies neither the absoluteness of moral rules nor the idea of the generality of morality itself. This doesn't itself constitute an argumentative contradiction. Simmel 'plays' with the contents of the terms and thereby develops his own understanding of morality as well as of duty and moral act. For instance, the category of generality in his interpretation means such wholeness of the human being that extends not only to all human beings, but primarily to the individual. This wholeness equally includes the rational and sensual parts of the individual. This could be understood in the way that the wholeness of the human being permeates every different part of its real life. The same can be applied to the moral law that Simmel describes as the individual law. On the one hand, the individual law reveals itself as a principle: but Simmel emphasizes that this individual law allows the individual and its real ethical acts to be determined as an inseparable whole. According to him, the principle of individuality, namely the individual law, as well as all other categories of Simmel's ethics, have an objective character because they are extracted from the real content of life.

In fact, Simmel adopts the ethical categories and ontologizes them. He considers the ethical principles as an ontological event. That is why he reduces the whole system of Kantian moral philosophy to one question: if the general duty should also be accepted 'for me' as 'my duty'. For Simmel, duty can only exist in a specific on-

tological form, as the consequence of the life process of the individual. The meaning of the ethical act is revealed through its being. This is the reason for him, why the Kant's moral system as the cause and the catalyst of moral action is insufficient. Kant's moral act is always aimed at the universal, general ideal. It explains some ideal picture or demonstrates some kind of ideal situation that exists in pure theory only. But it doesn't show how this ideal model actually 'works' ontologically which means 'not ideal' for Simmel. I think that he just wanted to eliminate this idealization of the individual as a moral being who always wanted to act according to the ethics rules. First of all, he wanted to emphasize that the ideal self and the real self are ethically two completely different subjects.

#### **4. How can morality be individual and objective at the same time?**

Simmel's 'play' with the 'fleeting' content of the 'fixed' ethical terms is particularly evident in his description of individuality as the center of his ethics. Morality, ought and duty show themselves in an individual way. It's noteworthy that Simmel's individuality is not the same as personality, identity or subjectivity. In his theory a clear line is drawn between these concepts. The individual presents itself strictly objectively compared to subjectivity. Subjectivity represents a sum of the individual's emotional ideas about the world and itself.

The reason for this distinction is important. Simmel wanted to give an objectivity to his individual morality. That is why, according to him, morality is rooted in the life stream and can't be separated from the specific human being. Individuality shows itself as the form of life with singleness as the basic property. This point should refer the objective character of individuality. One can ask critically, whether it actually represents the ontological uniqueness of the subject. There is no particular answer in Simmel's texts, although some hints of this solution can be found. For example, the moral rules come from the dynamic stream of life that is expressed in a specific living being. For this reason, they present themselves as individual and objective. The moral rules can't be general because they are particular<sup>7</sup>. If they were generally valid, they would be perhaps automatic 'super-individual' and abstract for Simmel.

Sometimes it seems that Simmel understands the individual law as objective only because it should be experienced in real life instead of its theoretical understanding through abstract categories. This is definitely a critical point in his theory. The thesis that the individual law and correspondingly moral can't be conceptually fixed loosens the structure of Simmel's ethical theory and provokes the question if such a difficult-to-define concept can be indicated as 'morality' at all. Who should determine the limits of this 'morality' and how can these limits be accepted by the individual without conceptual fixation?

Simmel introduces an idea of the 'feeling' of morality. We humans should "feel" how to behave. This feeling opens up the formless of life instead of its formal conceptual descriptions that don't correspond with the reality. Morality and duty should

<sup>7</sup> According to Simmel, duty becomes 'my' duty only when it's integrated through my act into my personal being: "Erst mit der Einordnung in die von meinem gesamten Daseinsbild bestimmten Pflichtreihen wird die Handlung meine Pflicht" (*Simmel G. Das Individuelle Gesetz. S. 203*).

'sprout' from the individuality instead of opposing it. Life plays the role of an incentive that prompts a person to build its own moral law adapted to its individuality.

This thesis appears as a consequence of Simmel's idea of individuality, according to which the living subject is rooted in life. From this the conclusion can be made that duty stems exclusively from individual life. Duty and morality exist individually just because they are 'mine', come from 'me' and regulate 'my' life.

It looks like Simmel avoided a clear concept of individuality because in this case he should have been taken all philosophical consequences of these solutions: the individuality will be analyzed as ontological, individual and finally unique. This could lead to the self as the basic origin and final instance of morality that would be incompatible with Simmel's liberal ethical creation. Such a result would damage the flexibility of Simmel's individual ethics. This is why he repeatedly emphasizes the objectivity of the individual law and refers to the newly presented 'generality' of the individual law, which doesn't extend over the individual, but is held by him.

Simmel's concept of generality should have the right to its own, non-Kantian interpretation. In my opinion, he didn't reach this goal. His interpretation questions the objectivity of individuality and makes it ambiguous. Simmel's individuality shows itself as a methodological aporia. If I try to interpret it ontologically, it will reveal itself too individual, that means 'singular' and 'unique'. Then I'll get 'my personal morality' for 'my' life. But here is a logical question. If morality and duty can only apply to 'me' and 'my' individual life, on what ethical platform can two or more individuals communicate with each other? How can it work in the society at all?

### **5. How does Simmel explain the ethical act?**

There is an opinion in the literature<sup>8</sup>, that Simmel didn't explain the concept of act because he didn't explain anything systematically. Actually, there is no coherent theory of ethical act or its precise description. Despite of this fact, the act plays a fundamental role in his ethical conception<sup>9</sup>. Unfortunately, it's true that he did not find a direct way to clear and accurate expression of his theory of the ethical act. The ethical act is mostly presented by him in relation to the Kantian ethics. This is about the relationship between general law (the categorical imperative) and individual law. The Kant's general law should theoretically unite all elements of human ethical act without neglecting its peripheral parts. Morality takes a leading role in this process of unification. All individual elements should be subordinated to morality under the general law on the base of rational justification. This idea is a main part of the conventional ethics as Simmel understands it. And it never works in the real life because humans are simply too complex for this unifying order. The core of

<sup>8</sup> This point of view is well discussed and represented in the famous essay of Jurgen Habermas about Simmel's system (Vid.: *Habermas J. Simmel als Zeitdiagnostiker // Simmel G. Philosophische Kultur. Über das Abenteuer, die Geschlechter und die Krise der Moderne. Gesammelte Essays.* Berlin, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> In most of Simmel's works is the act a present moment of reality of life: "Die Handlung ist die jetzige Realität dieses Lebensverlaufs", "sie sollte in der Lebenskontinuität aufsteigen" (*Simmel G. Das Individuelle Gesetz.* S. 188, 189).

human includes a variety of permanently interacting physical and emotional components that can hardly follow the rationalistically determined moral rules.

With every attempt to find a solid and permanent basis for the act and to justify it ethically, we only face a new ethical cliché. We construct an ethical standard of how to behave that never can work in its exemplary ideal form. This means that the fleeting, emotionally related core of human being that should be implemented through ethical acts escapes the ethics in fact.

This idea supports Simmel's argument that ethics as a system of norms increasing the discrepancy between ethical theory and the real practice of life. The theoretical characteristics of ethical action don't totally escape reality, but they don't explain and define it exactly. The being of the act and its theoretical description don't coincide with one another. They can't coincide with each other and become the whole because the ethical process of life theorizing separates the subject of the ethical act, the act itself and its result. For this reason, Simmel describes human act structurally as too inconsistent to be fixed by concrete ethical laws. Again and again, there will be exceptions that fall out of this law.

Moreover, a person can consciously act free of morality and duty. However, this doesn't mean that such an act automatically will be unethical. The assessment of the ethical act depends on what we really mean by the word 'ethical'. If the ethics could be applied only individually as in Simmel's case and if we accept the idea of the uniqueness of the ethical norms for each individual, then the act reveals itself fundamentally as an individual-ethical one. It's carried out by an individual who is an inseparable whole of emotions, feelings, reason, etc. That is why Simmel explains every act as being ethical itself, because it's primarily considered as individual, emotional-colored, dynamic, inconsistent.

This representation of the ethical act can be assessed critically because it awakes a lot of questions about its principle. We can ask for an act as an inseparable unit that consists of the process and its result. Is this act a phenomenon? How should we investigate it, and which method should be used? Or how can this evident singleness of the individual act be applied as its primary characteristic that makes it ethical at once? Can we talk here about the ethical act at all?

Simmel is cautious in all these topics. He tries to avoid any further phenomenological or ontological explanation of the individual act as an already ethical one in itself. He may not be interested in the internal structure of the act or in the ethical act as a phenomenon and phenomenological object. 'The individual law' is firstly about the ethical act as the embodiment of life. The life stream 'flows' into the act. The act should 'rise in the continuity of life'. This should be analyzed as a dynamic whole process instead of the objective result of this process. In this way, Simmel makes it clear that no general ethical norm can be regarded as the only 'driving force' behind the individual act. This could be theoretically possible if the act would not be a process but its objective part that is only generated by a rational part of the human being. The ethical act is not a direct product of reason. The general ethics promotes this artificial separation of the human being into reason (ratio) and emotions (feelings). Every general law deals either with one or other side of the individual, whose life however proceeds as a whole unit. We don't live as 'rational beings', Simmel comments. We can't always break down our life according to rationality,

reason, sensuality, and analyze every component through the ethics independently from the life wholeness. In this typical ethical evaluation, the act is separated from the subject of the act. Instead of the subject as a whole, the objective result of his act is ethically judged. After that, it will be compared with the ideal model and labeled as 'ethical' or 'non-ethical' one.

Simmel believes that it's a mistake that the general ethical norms can be directly considered as an individual case. This individual case is not a real case, but simply an abstraction. The act can be individualized, but it can't be practically explained to understand how it works. The ethical act is separated from its subject again. It's taken out from the wholeness of life and viewed as an inanimate object. The content and core of the action is alienated from life. The act is judged by the ethical norm that is constructed before it but not from it. This norm contradicts the action in every sense because it hardly affects the wholeness (continuity) of life. If we try to adapt morality to dynamic life, we artificially correlate two fundamentally different things according to Simmel. They can't be combined on the basis of ratio, because the ratio just can't be regarded as such foundation. We can't say that we are ethically obliged only because we are rational beings. If it was true, we would live naturally according to the ethical norm without its artificial construction.

### **The responsibility of the individual as a consequence of its life**

There are obvious problems of interpretation which unfortunately interfere with a true understanding of Simmel's ethics and hide his liberal ideas. Mostly, the concepts of Simmel's ethics have their own semantically ambiguous content that can hardly be specified. On the one hand, this semantic ambiguity allows us today to interpret his ethics completely free and to analyze it from every point of view, including anthropological and cultural-philosophical one. On the other hand, his ideas don't have particularity and structure at all. However, his wish is not aimed to the formation of a new, fixed concept of ethics that can be used as a theoretical model of peoples' behaviour. Simmel emphasizes that the ethical act, as well as morality, ought and responsibility, is unachievable through the apparently precise categories because they all can change itself in each individual real case.

However, I avoid to consider it as a weakness of his theory, but rather as the search for dialogue. From my point of view, Simmel wanted to answer the 'classic' ethical question that will probably never lose its relevance: how the individual can distinguish its actual existential duty from the one that is artificially ascribed to it, for example, through cultural patterns. Should I follow such a moral law that doesn't cross my life and which content is emotionally and psychologically alien to me?

The answer given by Simmel is unequivocal. My duty is the one that arises from my life or is derived from my own actions<sup>10</sup>. At first glance, this idea has

---

<sup>10</sup> Simmel writes that only I myself can decide what is my duty and what is not, and which of my actions relates to the concept of duty: "*Ich mag, was ich zu tun habe, noch so genau aus den sachlichen Verhältnissen der Dinge und aus Gesetzen, die außerhalb meiner entsprungen sind, herleiten zuletzt oder zuerst habe ich es zu tun, es gehört zu meinem Pflichtenkreis, mein Daseinsbild ist durch sein Vollbringen oder Unterlassen ein wertvolles oder wertloses*" (*Simmel G. Das Individuelle Gesetz. S. 201*).

a certain ontological logic: my actions belong to me and not to someone else. Of course, I know exactly what I've done and what I haven't. According to this logic, I also know whether the duty is mine or whether it's a theoretical concept, just a possible model constructed thought the reason that I can refuse if I want. Therefore, the duty is declared to be real and individual. My duty can come only from my life. But this doesn't mean that I give up general ethics and morality or, for example, reject the general law of Kant. This just means that I decide for myself which model corresponds to my life. I can accept or reject various abstract ethical theories. I may like them or not, but only me myself can decide whether I will implement these theories in my real actions. This ontological solution depends on myself, this is the point of Simmel. I am not responsible for arranging my life according to general ethical law. However, I am responsible for ensuring that this law is applied to me. I am fully responsible for this decision simply because it's really mine. This is the objective ontological responsibility for my own being that nobody can take away from my life. My responsibility for my actions is inseparable from me as a real living subject.

The advantage of Simmel's theory which makes it so attractive today is that Simmel is absolutely correct in his assessment of human being as unstable, fragile and fluid one. Simmel's individual is in constant doubt, it can't combine ethical theory and ethical practice in its own life. This individual is constantly split between theory and practice, between the moral law and its real day-to-day realization.

The Simmel's individual ethics is definitely not aimed to rejecting all moral norms and rules and to selfish and immoral living. His individual is not ethically free: the ethical behaviour of the human being arises from its life. The ethics belongs to life, and this is a fact. Simmel only asks what the word 'ethical' means for a specific real person in particular daily life. The purpose of his concept of ethics is to promote a reflection on human life process, those values and principles that are offered to the individual by society as ethical orientations, including culture, religion and philosophy. Simmel's concept is the basis for a permanent dialogue with ourselves. He asks if these values and principles that I have are really 'mine', which means they can make me a better person. For Simmel, this endless dialogue with the self, perhaps, was the sign of a certain mental flexibility that is a necessary condition for a modern individual to take part in the social processes. In his ideas of ethics Simmel definitely wanted to contribute to the ethical development of the liberal Western society and he has partially "succeeded" in it.

### Список литературы / References

- Simmel, G. "Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur", in: G. Simmel, *Das Individuelle Gesetz. Philosophische Exkurse*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1987. S. 116-148.
- Simmel, G. *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft. Eine Kritik der ethischen Grundbegriffe*. Berlin: W. Hertz, 1892-1893. 488 S.
- Simmel, G. "Das Individuelle Gesetz", in: G. Simmel, *Das Individuelle Gesetz. Philosophische Exkurse*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1987. S. 174-231.
- Coser, L.A. *Georg Simmel*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965. 184 pp.
- Deml, S. *Der Fremde bei Georg Simmel, Alfred Schütz und Robert Park*. München: Grin Verlag, 2003. 12 S.

Geßner, W. *Der Schatz im Acker. Georg Simmel Philosophie der Kultur*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2003. 328 S.

Habermas, J. "Simmel als Zeitdiagnostiker", in: G. Simmel. *Philosophische Kultur. Über das Abenteuer, die Geschlechter und die Krise der Moderne. Gesammelte Essays*, mit Vorwort von J. Habermas. Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1998. S. 7–17.

Helle, H.J. *Georg Simmel: Introduction to His Theory and Method*. München; Wien: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2001. 432 pp.

Kant, I. *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. 120 pp.

Landmann, M. "Georg Simmel: Konturen seines Denkens", *Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Klostermann, 1976. S. 3–17.

Meyer, I. *Georg Simmel's Ästhetik: Autonomiepostulat und soziologische Referenz*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2017. 394 S.

### **Некоторые вопросы этики Георга Зиммеля (по эссе «Индивидуальный закон»)**

**Марина В. Рендл**

Доктор философских наук (Россия), доктор философии (Австрия). Инсбрукский университет, католико-теологический факультет, Австрия. Österreich, 6020, Innsbruck, Karl-Rahner-Platz, 1; e-mail: rendlmv@gmail.com

Наследие Георга Зиммеля обычно рассматривается в рамках «философии жизни» и крайне редко идентифицируется с этикой. Тем более удивительными кажутся те его работы, в которых представление об этическом полностью сформировано. Эта «популярная» этика чрезвычайно привлекательна и актуальна, потому что полностью сфокусирована на теме обычного живого человека с его уязвимым хрупким бытием и изменчивыми ценностями, идеалами и принципами. Действия этого человека как правило не подчинены какой-либо конкретной этической модели, что, однако, не означает, что они незачинны. Этическая теория не совпадает с этической практикой человеческой жизни: эта идея является отправной точкой зиммелевского концепта индивидуальной этики. В статье обсуждаются некоторые очевидные проблемы этого концепта в эссе «Индивидуальный закон», равно как и зиммелевская критика этики Иммануила Канта. Зиммель поднимает базовые этические вопросы, которые интересуют любого разумного человека: что означают понятия долга и морали? Как применить эти категории к собственной жизни? Можно ли жить без этики? Ответы Зиммеля не идеальны, и требуют дополнений. В статье обсуждаются их преимущества и недостатки, равно как и вопрос, является ли зиммелевский проект этикой как таковой.

**Ключевые слова:** Георг Зиммель, этика, индивидуальность, мораль, долг