Book Review/Compte rendu

Georg Simmel, *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms*. Translated by John Andrews and Donald Levine, With an introduction by Donald Levine and Daniel Silver. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 240 pp. $US 35.00 hardcover (978-0-226-75783-4)

Not least among the editorial decisions for which readers of this seminal publication can be grateful are the quotations that serve as back-cover blurbs. The first quotes the critical theorist Max Horkheimer, in 1956: "Georg Simmel is the only sociologist one can read anymore." The second quotes the University of Chicago urban sociologist, and Simmel's student, Robert E. Park: "Although Simmel has written the most profound and stimulating book in sociology, in my opinion ... he was not in the first instance a sociologist but a philosopher." This translation of *The View of Life* affirms both judgments, although both raise more questions than they settle. For what reader is Simmel the "only" sociologist to read, and how do Simmel's philosophical writings relate to his sociology?

Horkheimer's assertion will seem least hyperbolic to readers who look to sociology for wisdom about how to live a fully human life. Simmel's *Journal Aphorisms* may number only 166, requiring 28 pages of text, but they establish his place in the tradition from Marcus Aurelius through Pascal. Here are two samples, chosen for their brevity: "One can assert but not prove the ultimate, highest, objective values — one must prove but not assert one's own value" (p. 170), and "What better thing can a man wish himself than a great task and a fortitude for it that no longer depends on the hope of its solution?" (p. 171). This volume would be worth purchasing for the aphorisms alone. But their scope and style raises Park's issue: are these writings part of the sociological canon? Not the least academic question raised by *The View of Life* is that of the book itself: do sociologists want their discipline to be able to embrace all of Simmel's writing, not splitting his work as Park implies? Does sociology aspire to wisdom on how to live?

The four essays that fill the first 154 pages of this volume — following an incisive critical introduction — were published in German (*Lebensanchuung*) in 1918, just before Simmel's death. The aphorisms were published posthumously the next year. Donald N. Levine's earlier

translation of the first essay, "Life as Transcendence" appeared in the 1971 volume Levine edited for the University of Chicago's Heritage of Sociology Series, *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms*. John Andrews translated *Lebensanchuung* in 1998 but it was unpublished. Levine assembled a team of colleagues to revise what became the present translation. This volume's cover photograph of Simmel, convincing me that faces convey their own truth, perfectly complements the text.

Each of the four essays stands alone, yet consistency of concerns unifies them. What Simmel means by transcendence in the first and shortest essay is life's "capacity to go out beyond itself, to set its limits by reaching out beyond them; that is, beyond itself" (p. 10). The tension of limits introduces Simmel's idea of *form*, the unifying concept in these essays: "Form means limits, contrast what is neighboring, cohesion of a periphery by means of a real or an ideal center to which, as it were, the ever onflowing sequences of contents or processes are bent back" (p. 11). This language of limit and flow has more obvious affinity with the writings of Simmel's contemporary philosophers of consciousness, such as Edmund Husserl, Henri Bergson, and William James, than with Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, yet Simmel's profound sociological insight is that life becomes social as it is organized first into forms and later by these forms.

The second essay, "The Turn Toward Ideas," elaborates the capacity of forms to render life perceptible. Perception, for Simmel as for James, is "a selection from unlimited possibilities," and any selection "leaves a host of things outside of them" (p. 42). The essay then develops Simmel's "tragedy of culture" argument. Although previously summarized by Levine, the full, original text has never before been available in English. Stated in the briefest terms, life first creates forms as "more-than-life" (p. 60), but in a counter movement, "life often wounds itself upon the structures it has externalized from itself as strictly objective" (p. 61).

The third and fourth essays present the most strikingly new material. In the third, "Death and Immortality" Simmel anticipates Martin Heidegger's philosophy of human temporality. As Simmel states it:

> We hold our plans and actions, duties and interpersonal relations (obviously not by conscious consideration ...) from the outset within bounds proportioned to a death-delimited life. But the way this delimiting or forming of life occurs — both as a whole and in its particulars — is determined by the fact that, though we are absolutely certain about the 'whether' of the end, we are nevertheless absolutely uncertain about its 'when.' (p. 66)

Simmel then attempts nothing less than an argument for a version of immortality. One of his aphorisms comes closest to summarizing it:

> By my existence I am nothing more than an empty place, an outline, that is reserved within being in general. Given with it, though, is the duty to fill in this empty place. That is my life. (p. 170)

As good as this aphorism may be, the essay's argument goes much further.

Simmel's emphasis on *duty* in the aphorism just quoted is the topic of the fourth and longest essay, "The Law of the Individual," in which he addresses Kant's categorical imperative, refuting both its logic and its practical value. Simmel's argument develops from his objection to Kant's artificial isolation of particular acts from the flow of lived action. In the actual, attempted living of a moral life, each act becomes meaningful only in sequence with other acts: "the next-but-one lies in darkness and only becomes clear when the next is done." Thus, moral life cannot be "cut up into a number of individual 'actions,' each measured against a law constituted once-and-for-all" (p. 109). Simmel is no moral relativist, but he imagines "a *supple* absoluteness" to moral judgment. He is most emphatic in rejecting Kant's insistence that "the act can be recognized as exactly the same act within the most diverse life courses" (p. 116).

Like his argument on immortality, Simmel's "law of the individual" defies concise summary, yet when I find myself getting lost in his nuances and distinctions, he offers sudden illumination:

> Instead of the truly bleak Nietzschean thought—'Can you desire that this action of yours recur infinitely often?'—I propose: 'Can you desire that this action of yours should define your entire life?' (p. 151)

Those words exemplify my initial claim that for wisdom in how to live, no sociologist matches Simmel.

Levine and Silver's introduction warns readers that this book requires "patient and careful reading" (p. xi). That demand, however, recalls the aphorism I quoted about a great task requiring no hope for its solution. But the uncompromising density of the book's prose may be the lesser issue. More difficult is why sociology should expand its concerns to include Simmel's questions of transcendence, immortality, and duty.

It would be a sad irony if sociologists were to take too literally Park's splitting of Simmel's writing and relegate this book to the other shore of philosophy. That reification of disciplinary distinctions would enact what Simmel taught that forms invariably end by doing: creating rigid boundaries, thus cutting themselves off from the vital energies that generated them. For sociology, those vital energies arise in people questioning how to live their lives: questions bounded by death and revolving around duty. To feel those energies most directly, perhaps begin this

book with the *Journal Aphorisms*. There, most clearly, is Simmel's imagination of how the old academic disciplinary forms can transcend their present limits, that something new might emerge.

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Arthur W. Frank is professor of sociology at the University of Calgary and hopes to review books for a long time to come, but none may be as significant as Simmel's late essays. Frank's own most recent book is *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-narratology* (2010).
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