Simmel, Heidegger and the Present Now

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While acknowledging recent efforts to recognise the genuinely ontological aspects of Georg Simmel’s philosophy of life (and especially its links to the later fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger), this paper focuses on one seemingly important ontological implication of some specific societal claims made by Simmel that has previously received minimal attention. By reading these claims as entailing a kind of ontological ‘space’ within which an individual attempts to mediate between social roles, this paper seeks to return attention to those contextually immediate interests which underpin the fulfilment of those social roles that foundationally shape our conception of the present ‘now’. In doing so, this paper considers the other extreme, as it were, of the temporalising structure which is the focus of a more traditional understanding of Heideggerian ‘authentic’ temporality.

Together with Max Weber, Georg Simmel (1858–1918) is recognised as one of the first generation of German sociologists and one of the founders of the discipline of sociology itself. Indeed, in the United States it is this legacy for which Simmel is most well known, although more recently Simmel’s contributions (and their possible value) to the disciplines of history, cultural studies and philosophy have received increasing attention.

Notable in this respect was a set of three papers that appeared in Human Studies: A Journal for Philosophy and the Social Sciences (Springer, Netherlands) in 2003, under cover of an introduction by Gary Backhaus. As noted by Backhaus, the papers were ‘meant to motivate further historical research concerning, and the creative use of, Simmel’s philosophy of history towards the goal of developing a phenomenological approach to history’2. In particular, the third of those papers, by John E Jalbert3, sought to address Simmel’s philosophy of life, and in this context highlight the extent to which that understanding might be seen as having parallels with, or indeed contributing to, some of the central

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1I am grateful for the opportunity to present a very early outline of what became this current paper to the participants of the third year Advanced Continental Philosophy course (PHIL3071) conducted by the Australian National University in Semester 2 of 2008, and for the feedback I received as a result. I also wish to acknowledge the initial reviewer and final referee comments which I received anonymously from Limina, in submitting (in 2008) earlier drafts of this paper for consideration, and from which this paper benefited in its finalisation. Individuals to whom I am particularly indebted (i.e. with respect to any specific claims made in this paper) are noted below.


characteristics which Martin Heidegger would later ascribe in Being and Time\(^4\), to the ‘historicity’ and essential finitude characteristic of Dasein\(^5\).

More recently, and quite separate to Jalbert’s exegetical attempts to recognise in Simmel precursors to some of the central features of Heidegger’s account of historicity, Carleton Christensen has sought to apply Simmel’s social ontology as a useful heuristic for better understanding Heidegger’s seemingly schizophrenic treatment in Being and Time of the anonymous and publicly available forms of being in which we engage in everyday activities – that is, of das Man\(^6\). In seminars given in Chicago and Canberra\(^7\), Christensen has attempted to show how an essentially agonistic Simmelian social ontology can help in understanding how Heidegger’s characterisation of das Man, in both positive and negative terms, is in fact consistent pace both Frederick A Olafson and Hubert L Dreyfus\(^8\). Christensen has sought to do this through a close reading of Simmelian social ontology in comparison with apparently parallel structures in Heideggerian thought. Significantly, the hermeneutic benefits of this reading occur irrespective of the extent to which Heidegger was actually indebted to Simmel.

My aim in this current paper is, firstly, to respond to Backhaus’ call for ‘creative use’ of Simmel’s philosophy; and secondly, to use this as a means of advancing our understanding of Heideggerian thought, as per Christensen’s attempts earlier this year. However, the particular understanding to which I hope to draw attention, which I hope is consistent with or even complementary to Christensen’s account, differs from that account in both the particular features it highlights, as well as in the methodology adopted. Not least, I shall pay less attention (pace both Jalbert and Christensen) to what Simmel’s philosophy actually was, and instead focus on some specific claims which are made in one particular selection of Simmel’s essays\(^9\), and the resonance this has concerning both the nature and


\(^5\)Noting that what Heidegger means by ‘Dasein’ can, as a very rough guide, be understood as the way that human beings are in the world.

\(^6\)In particular, an apparent schism can seem to arise in the way in which Heidegger analyses das Man (which may be translated as ‘the They’ or ‘the One’). Namely, as both: (i) an ‘essential existentiale’, in that it not only ‘belongs to Dasein’s positive constitution’, but it is a condition for that existentiell modification which constitutes ‘authentically’ being-one’s-self (see Heidegger, Being and Time, pp.167–168; or pp.129–130 in the original pagination of the seventh German edition [denoted hereafter using standard notation, as H129–H130]); and (ii) yet also a structure with respect to which Dasein nevertheless risks ‘falling’ and becoming ‘entangled’ in itself (see ibid, Chapter V (B), pp.210224 [H166H180]). Such considerations prompted Herbert L Dreyfus to initially claim that Heidegger’s chapter (IV) on das Man was one of ‘the most confused’ (Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World: A Commentary of Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I, MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts/London, 1991, p.143), in that it tended to oscillate between these two opposing perspectives. Dreyfus attributed these two perspectives to ‘the Diltheyan insight that intelligibility and truth arise only in the context of public, historical practices’, and ‘the Kierkegaardian view that “the truth is never in the crowd.”’ (ibid.). It is precisely this apparent need to explain away claims (i) and (ii) which Christensen rejects.

\(^7\)Christensen, ‘Heidegger on das Man – Using Simmel to reconcile Dreyfus and Olafson’ (unpublished manuscript), as presented to de Paul University (Chicago, USA) on 16 January 2009, and to the Australian National University (Canberra, Australia) on 18 September 2009.

\(^8\)In particular, Christensen’s reading of Heidegger is offered as a way of reconciling the opposing interpretations afforded by Dreyfus (emphasising the importance of social praxis) and Olafson (emphasising the importance of presence). For example, see Dreyfus’ Being-in-the-World and the subsequent exchange which occurred between Olafson and Talyor Carman, who defended Dreyfus’ position (in Olafson, ‘Heidegger a la Wittgenstein or ‘Coping with Professor Dreyfus’; Carman, ‘On Being Social: A Reply to Olafson’; and Olafson, ‘Individualism, Subjectivity, and Presence: A Response to Taylor Carman’). The exchange was published in Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy, vol.37, nos. 1, (pp.45–64), 2 (pp.203–223) and 3 (pp.331–337), March–September 1994, respectively.

\(^9\)The majority of selections identified for this purpose are from Donald N Levine (ed.), Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms – Selected Writings, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971.

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necessary foundation of human social being. In other words, I will be less concerned with those claims as they can be understood in the context of Simmel’s wider corpus, and more with how they may be creatively appropriated to advance a better understanding of what that necessary foundation actually is. In doing so, I also hope to show how this enables us to better understand certain features of Heidegger’s thought.

This last understanding concerns the other extreme, as it were, of the temporalising structure which is the focus of Jalbert’s paper. Specifically, rather than focusing on the parallels between Simmel and Heidegger with respect to the larger-scale temporalising structures of birth and death, my focus will ultimately be on the ‘making present’ phenomenon implicit in certain of Simmel’s descriptions of social being, and which would seem to have application for understanding Heidegger not only in terms of the inauthentic construction of the ‘now’, but also for Heidegger’s related discussion of das Man. This, I will suggest, has an important implication for understanding both the functioning and inherent tendencies of contemporary mass life. But I will also suggest that this understanding has important implications for reassessing (in turn) traditional interpretations of those larger-scale, Heideggerian existential structures.

I begin the paper with some preliminary comments on some main insights concerning the nature of human social being. I then comment further on three structural features of these insights, which I take to be resonant with three core claims from Simmel’s sociological thought. I do this not only on the basis that essentially these same structural features are repeated at different times throughout the texts which have been selected, but that significantly these features seem to be genuinely apropos to human social being. To this extent, I also assume that this warrants the various shifts between the different texts cited below, to either support or clarify my analysis of what I take these core structural features to be. Finally, I will conclude with some further comments on what would appear, as already noted above, some implications of this analysis.

Preliminary Comments

Central to understanding Simmel’s thought, and therefore any of his more specific socio-cultural claims, is the fact that he shares in a tradition of taking the human individual as something which is truly irreducible. That is, he understands the individual as something fundamental, in the sense that it cannot be fully reduced to talk of objectively occurrent social properties and interactions, and which on this basis has to be taken into account in any genuine diagnostic of human social being. This is something that I

10 In referring to ‘human social being’, I will tend to ignore the fine distinctions which Simmel makes in his own writings (except to the extent to which I directly cite those texts) between the different forms and aspects of social being. Whilst this may do violence to those texts per se, my warrant for doing so is that it seems apropos to an understanding of that being itself.

11 I am indebted to Dr Christensen for this particular realisation. Of course, the extent to which Simmel himself explicitly recognised this particular temporal implication (i.e. in his own social theory) would seem a quite separate question. More important for the purposes of this current paper is what would seem the implications of some of Simmels’ sociological descriptions per se.

12 It is not insignificant that Simmel’s claims in this respect often seem to shift between ontic observations as to how human beings actually are socially, and the ontological structures which must thereby obtain if these social forms are to be manifest at all (as indeed they are). This is not necessarily a defect, for consistent with what Heidegger recognises, the roots of the existential analysis of Dasein (and thereby fundamental ontology as such) ‘on its part, are ultimately existentiell, that is, ontical’ (Heidegger, Being and Time, p.34 [H13]). Whilst noting this, it might also be observed that Simmel, unlike Heidegger, is not at pains to highlight these shifts. As for what Heidegger actually means by the terms ‘ontic’ and ‘ontological’, I follow Macquarrie and Robinson here in their explanation that ‘Ontological inquiry is concerned primarily with Being; ontical inquiry is concerned primarily with entities and the facts about them.’ (ibid, p.31 note 3). In other words, Heideggerian ontological inquiry would seem to concern the necessary structures of being, which in that particular sense would seem not that dissimilar (at least formally) from Kant’s philosophical concerns.
take he shares, for instance, with Heidegger. For although some writers such as Dreyfus have tended to emphasise the importance of what are effectively social norms and roles for Heidegger, taking individuality as intrinsic to who we are as Dasein would seem the only way to make sense of Heidegger’s equal insistence on authenticity and the like. Furthermore, although it might appear to some as an anachronistic romanticism, the irreducibility of the individual continues to be afforded powerful support from contemporary philosophical studies, which maintain that the self-ascription of experience is a fundamental and ineliminable feature of human selfhood.

At the same time, the fact that we exist socially is, per Simmel, essential for constituting who we are as coherent individuals. This is implicit when Simmel says of our individuality that:

It is supplemented by the other’s view of us, which results in something that we never are purely and wholly. It is impossible for this view to see anything but juxtaposed fragments, which nevertheless are all that really exist. However, just as we compensate for a blind spot in our vision so that we are no longer aware of it, so a fragmentary structure is transformed by another’s view into the completeness of an individuality.

Now compare Heidegger’s claim that:

The ontologically relevant result of our analysis of Being-with is the insight that the ‘subject character’ of one’s own Dasein and that of Others is to be defined existentially – that is, in terms of certain ways in which one may be. In that with which we concern ourselves environmentally the Others are encountered as what they are; they are what they do…

Taken cognately, both claims are consistent with the view that one’s own being, as well as the being of others, is to be found in what we do (and in that sense not only in what activities we undertake, but also what roles we perform in undertaking those activities), what we do in any significantly complex sense (i.e. beyond autonomic activities such as breathing) is only ever available to us through others. For example, through the various social roles we see them as instantiating, and the social possibilities that we thereby see as open to us to either adopt or reject as the individuals we both are and wish to become. But as I will claim below, this role-playing (and by this I do not only mean the kind of dilettante manoeuvring which some may enjoy at social gatherings) seems rarely, if ever, completely fulfilled. There always seems some remainder, either in terms of the idealised social role to which we may aspire but never completely satisfy (e.g. the ‘good’ husband or father, student or employee), or some extrasocial aspect of ourselves as individuals which is never completely comprehended by the actual social roles on offer.

It is in this way that Simmel recognises an inherent tension or opposition between irreducible individuality on the one hand, and on the other the social forms through which that individuality is ineluctably expressed, or even made possible. For this reason, Simmel advocates the view that society

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13 Especially in his Being-in-the-World (cited above).
14 One could, of course, posit social norms as the more fundamental feature of human experiential being, and then attempt to explain what Heidegger says in Being and Time as to individuality (qua authenticity) in just those terms – or indeed, to simply dismiss the latter as some logical failing or argumentative defect. Something at least approaching this tendency might arguably be detected in how Dreyfus sometimes writes. Or conversely, the reverse position could be taken to emphasise the essential individuality of being, in a way reminiscent perhaps of existentialism. However, the result would be the same – an emphasis on some parts of Being and Time at the expense (in explanatory terms) of the others.
16 Simmel, ‘How is Society Possible?’, Kurt H Wolff (tr.), in On Individuality and Social Forms, p.11.
17 Heidegger, Being and Time, p.163 (H126).
must be regarded as ‘a reality in a double sense’\(^\text{18}\), which acknowledges both: (i) individuals as the ‘bearers’ of the processes of association who are united by what may be regarded as essentially objective socio-cultural processes; and (ii) the subjective interests of individuals which motivate our union into those forms of social life. It is exactly this structural opposition or polarity that seems evident in the first two ‘a priori’ conditions for social being which Simmel identifies in his 1908 essay ‘How is Society Possible?’, and which will be explored in the following sections\(^\text{19}\).

First condition: Social types and typification\(^\text{20}\)

In discussing Simmel’s first condition, I will suggest that our conception of what we might call the present ‘now’, and indeed its very formation (what I have referred to above as ‘making present’), relates inherently to our social roles and activities, which address and change according to our particular social situation\(^\text{21}\). Moreover, I will suggest that in Heidegger this relates to his analysis of ‘everydayness’ (Alltäglichkeit), which constitutes our usual way of concernful engagement with the world, and which thereby includes the social roles and activities which inevitably form part of that engagement. However, neither would be manifest if, indeed, we did not have some inherent capacity and even structural requirement (which may, in turn, ontically manifest as some individual psychological ‘drive’) to affiliate with others in the way that we do.

This requirement to affiliate with others in social groupings, e.g. in order to form any coherent individualities at all, might be regarded as a or even the unifying force in social being (although any ‘drive’ per se would of course remain an inextricably individual impulse – see below). For Simmel at least, any such requirement is underpinned, or indeed enabled, by the fact or capacity that we view each other through the generalisation, and thereby also distortion, of various social types (including such ethical/value judgements as good/bad etc.). In this respect, there seems a gradation of different general-to-specific categories of typifications that can occur. For example, such typifications can range from general assessments of a person’s ‘good character’, to more specific local typifications such as ‘friend’ (and the apparently related increase in specificity from ‘good person’ to ‘good friend’) and to even more rigidly

\(^{18}\)Simmel, ‘Sociability’, Everett C Hughes (tr.), in On Individuality and Social Forms, p.127. It is important to note that although the reference here is taken from an essay on what Simmel terms ‘sociability’, the reference itself concerns the reality of human society per se.

\(^{19}\)As will be noted below, Simmel actually identifies three such ‘a priori’ conditions. Interestingly, the formal, expository structure that Simmel’s written analysis seems required to take in examining these three conditions has something of the flavour of the Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis distinction. Of course, in another sense Simmel’s three a priori conditions for social being might be thought to differ from the formal structure inherent in this written analysis, in that there is a phenomenological ‘givenness’ to each of the conditions. Specifically, there is in this sense no ‘working out’ of an antithetical position in opposition to an initial (and unsatisfactory) position, let alone a subsequent ‘working out’ of an even more satisfactory synthesis of these positions. Consistent with what has already been outlined above, and for which I am grateful to fellow student Anthony Hayes for noting to me, there is a sense in which the individual both confronts and enables (and indeed is enabled by) society/social being all at once. This seems partly confirmed by Simmel himself, when he says that: ‘The individual is contained in sociation and, at the same time finds himself confronted by it’ (Simmel, ‘How Is Society Possible?’, p.17). There is indeed a synthesis, but it seems more like an ontological (and ontically instantiated and variable) ‘space’ in which these confronting/enabling oppositions can work themselves ‘out’ as it were. On Simmel’s account, these oppositions may seem able to be individually named, but they are not thereby actually (or perhaps even really conceptually) severable. Hence in Simmel’s discussions on individuality there is irrefutable reference to society and social being, and vice versa. In this respect, there is a strong suggestion here of something at least like Heidegger’s unified sense of ‘being-in-the-world’.

\(^{20}\)See ibid, pp.9–12.

\(^{21}\)As noted above, I am indebted to Dr Christensen for this particular insight and its relation to both the Simmelian and Heideggerian discussions of social being which occur in this section. Once again though, the extent to which Simmel himself explicitly recognised this particular temporal implication (i.e. in his own social theory) would seem a quite separate question.
defined (and in that respect also societally contingent) social roles such as ‘engineer’, ‘serial killer’, etc. Essentially the same gradation can be witnessed in some contemporary employment requirements, in that the same set of selection criteria may range from requiring the potential employee to be of ‘good character and reputation’, to being a ‘team player’ and possessing specific work experience or academic qualifications.

Consistent with what has already been noted above, these types rarely, if ever, seem to completely define an individual. But just as equally, rarely, if ever, do individuals seem to completely satisfy what those types ‘ideally’ are either. There always seems some remainder to who we are, either currently or potentially, as individuals; or else to what idealised social type or more specific role we are trying to ‘fill’. Nevertheless (and as also noted above), these typifications of others help form who we are in the ontological sense of unifying what would otherwise be mere fragmentary selves. It is on the basis of such typifications and, in particular, perceived specific social affiliations (including, for those excluded from a society’s mainstream affiliations, certain ‘stranger’ types22), that we regard each other as cohabitants of the same specific worlds. For example, as members of the same church, vocation, family, social class, etc. Such typifications not only help cohere who we are, but make possible any social relation at all.

Moreover, for Simmel the impulse to associate with others is something which is inherent in us as individuals23. Beyond any particular goals an individual may harbour towards the achievement of particular social objectives or the fulfilment of particular social roles, we seem to have a basic impulse (founded on a more basic, structural need) for social being, which impels individuals to gain satisfaction from social ‘games’ (of admittedly various sorts, from simply not slaughtering each other, to the more vacuous world of the social dilettante) in and of themselves. That is, ‘playing’ at being social (since any limitation on our potentially unplumbed capacity for destruction and dissolution is, inherently, a performance which is delimited by the roles others ‘play’ for, with or against us). This can have both negative and positive aspects, but common to all is an active tendency, or even compulsion, for individuals to willingly surrender the more prominent aspects of their individuality (to a greater or lesser extent, dependent on the form of the social game being played) in order to play the ‘game’ of simply belonging with others, which we genuinely, as the beings we are, enjoy playing. It is a reciprocal limiting for the sake of playing nice with others, in a game which we typically want to play, which finds its ultimate ideal in the democratic society where everyone is (only ever ideally) equal.

See Simmel, ‘The Stranger’, Levine (tr.), in On Individuality and Social Forms, p.148. The ‘stranger’ type also has significance for the section below.

22 See Simmel, ‘Sociability’, Levine (tr.), in On Individuality and Social Forms, p.128. Implicit in much of what follows in the remainder of this section is the phenomenally apparent consequence that the basic requirement to associate with others seems to result in the synthesis of satisfying an individual drive to participate in such social games/roles only at the expense of necessarily holding/reserving something of ourselves back – something ‘raw’ which, in a Hobbesian sense, is not always conducive to playing nice with others. Most importantly, this ‘holding back’ is not to be misunderstood as solely the kind of dilettante performance which some may dutifully ‘play’ at social parties (for example, the vacuous ‘chatting’ that we may engage in on such occasions because offering anything more would be considered ‘out of bounds’).

Rather, it is the kind of ‘holding back’ of such actions as bashing someone’s head in, or slashing their throat just because they happen to ‘piss-me-off’, which seems essential for engaging in any form of social being at all (n.b. for the simple reason that I can’t engage with others in order to be ‘me’, if in fact there are no others to engage with). It is precisely this feature of human social being to which Simmel refers when he claims that ‘If, however, there is any consideration, any limit to violence, there already exists a socializing factor, even though only as the qualification of violence.’ (Simmel, ‘Conflict’, Wolff [tr.], in On Individuality and Social Forms, p.81). This reservation, which results as the synthesis or ‘working out’ of any so-called drive to being social (which is, in turn, underpinned and enabled by Simmel’s first a priori condition of social types and typification), occurs in opposition to the equally central and second a priori condition manifest in the maintenance, in each of us, of our distinct individuality (as discussed in the next section). Consistent with what has been noted above, this opposition is a or even the central theme for Simmel, with Simmel’s third and last a priori condition as a kind of ontological ‘space’ which is necessarily emergent given the interplay of these two intrinsic oppositions in our ‘natures’.

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Significantly, this ‘reserving’ or limiting, and in some sense wilful ‘forgetting’, of our individual selves for the sake of playing nice with others, in terms of the social games and interests which concern us at that time and in that context, seems foundational for our conception of the present ‘now’. In forgetting our most radically individual (and essentially fragmentary) selves, we nevertheless limit ourselves not only in terms of the ‘who’ we show ourselves to be to others, but also in terms of what concerns us at that time as that ‘who’. This sheds a further interesting light on Heidegger’s claim that ‘It could be that the “who” of everyday Dasein just is not the “I myself”’. Rather than just the possibility that everyday Dasein is the anonymous ‘They’ or ‘One’ of das Man, inherent in that identification would seem both the ‘making present’ of ‘circumspective concernful clock-using’ (e.g. in making every moment literally ‘count’), and the fleeting concerns characteristic of the ‘freed’ curiosity partly typical of Dasein’s ‘everydayness’, which rise and fall with the passing of each succeeding ‘now’. If this is true, then such radically reductionist temporalising, in the sense of reducing every temporal span to a succession of ‘nows’, would seem an inherent feature or tendency of das Man.

At the same time, the idea of a person’s ‘real, unconditionally individual nature’ remains a guiding heuristic principle for recognising that we are still dealing with individuals; and that everyone (to varying degrees) is subordinating/reserving some aspects of themselves in order to engage in these public roles/games. Essentially this same principle, as manifest phenomenally in each of our individual lives, will be discussed in the section below.

Second condition: Extrasociality and the notion of a ‘society’ of potentially autonomous individuals

Put bluntly, Simmel’s account of the various forms and aspects of social being, as well as Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, both recognise that any requirement to associate with others (which might be interpreted or even manifest ontically as an individually instantiated ‘drive’ to such association) does not constitute our entirety as individuals. Both ontically and phenomenologically, an individual retains a certain ‘distance’ from the society to which they belong, which is nevertheless also constitutive for the way in which they do belong to that society. For example, in the manner that a society, as being partly constitutive for it, may exclude certain individuals who are typified as outlaws and other outcasts (and which in itself entails a certain type, or set of types, of ‘strangers’ per the section above). This feature is particularly important insofar as certain types of ‘strangers’ may nevertheless remain part of and operative within the society which, in other respects, rejects them (e.g. the ‘oddball’, foreign/migrant worker or, especially in Simmel’s time, Jew).

It is in this respect that this distance also applies more generally to the extrasocial aspects of an individual’s life (temperament, interests, etc.), in the sense of how much we keep back as an individual ‘reserve’ which is neither absorbed fully within our social relations (as they would tend towards if we were to live entirely for another) or suppressed/annihilated by our social roles (if we were just those roles). Of course, such a ‘reserve’ is not necessarily a sign of individual wellbeing either, as manifest in the schizophrenic fragmentation of contemporary Western society. In particular, not only may people typically engage in various social roles/employment without having any real personal investment in those roles (i.e. other than is required for the purpose of earning money to live), but they are often required to pretend that they do have such an investment. That is, that they do, to the contrary, personally ‘care’ about

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24 Heidegger, Being and Time, p.150 (H115).
25 ibid, p.473 (H421).
26 Cf. Heidegger’s claim that such curiosity ‘…does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters’. (ibid, p.216 (H172)).
28 ibid, pp.12–18.
their work. In this way, an employee may often be required to make a ‘show’ of their commitment to their employer’s aims and values etc., despite knowing all the while that that display is almost entirely bogus.\(^{29}\)

But what is more significant is that individual living in all societies manifests the existence of some kind of ‘distance’ or ‘reserve’, for the simple reason that without some sense of individual and individuated self (as separated from that of the collective), no individual choice would seem possible. Of course, one might expect the exercise of such choice to vary tremendously between different societies and cultures. In some (e.g. without rigid power/decision-making structures), the capacity to exercise dissent, by simply refusing to engage in a decision or an activity of the group, might be a commonplace feature of ‘belonging’ to that collective. In others, the consequences for departing from collective decisions might have a coercive effect against individual dissent. But in all societies, it remains a simple fact that individuals have always chosen, at various times (and for various reasons), not to participate in the decisions of the collective.

This variously ontically instantiated ‘distance’, which we maintain from society as individuals, provides the apparently only (and to that extent, structurally necessary and thereby ontological) basis by which we may perceive a relation between ourselves on the one hand and society on the other, and the perspectival pole by which an individual ‘views his life from its own center and for its own sake’.\(^{30}\) Prima facie, this suggests at least some parallels with Heidegger’s claim that, insofar as we do anything, we not only do it for some (essentially teleological) aim or purpose, but that purpose ‘always pertains to the Being of Dasein, for which, in its Being, that very Being is essentially an issue’.\(^{31}\) Of course, Heidegger is here talking to more than just some perspectival pole by which we view our own lives, or indeed the fact that our worlds in some sense hinge for their meaning around us as focal points. Rather, how we are in the world is a matter which is determinative for who we are, and vice versa. We are always finding ourselves in the world, as well as finding in the world what we need to become to be the individuals we are. But in doing so, as radically individuated individuals, each of us is forever (in at least some sense) out-of-kilter or off-balance,\(^{32}\) or to borrow a term from Mark Bickhard, ‘far-from-equilibrium’.\(^{33}\)

Simmel’s observation, as noted above and to paraphrase as follows – that the social roles we undertake never seem a complete ‘fit’ for us, nor us for them – is entirely consistent with, and perhaps at least partly explanatory of, this existential need to be forever finding ourselves. However, none of this

\(^{29}\)For example, cf. what Matthew Stewart says in comparing his own work experience in Stewart, The Management Myth: Why the Experts Keep Getting it Wrong, WW Norton & Co., New York/London, 2009, p.258. What is fundamentally deluded about such required shows of employee commitment is the false extension from ‘the idea that work can be meaningful’ to the point where there is supposedly ‘no meaning outside work’ (ibid, pp.280–281)

\(^{30}\)Simmel, ‘How Is Society Possible?’, p.18.

\(^{31}\)Heidegger, Being and Time, pp.116–117 (H84).

\(^{32}\)This is definitely not to say that human beings are fragile, in the sense of always being prone to falling over. To quite the contrary, as human beings we are remarkably robust. But we are robust in the sense that we are able, as well as structurally need, to find ourselves (how we may be and therefore who we are) in our external environs. And this is because, in a certain sense, we lack ‘proper working order’, alignment or even stability, in and of our radically individuated selves alone. We are forever in need of something outside ourselves as it were, in order to be, and to be stable as, the beings we are. In this light, and consistent with the discussion (above) of Simmel’s first a priori condition, our social being-with would seem to afford just such a condition for individual cohesion and stability.

\(^{33}\)For example, see Mark H Bickhard, ‘Autonomy, Function, and Representation’, in CC-AI (Communication and Cognition – Artificial Intelligence): Journal for the Integrated Study of Artificial Intelligence, Cognitive Science and Applied Epistemology, vol.17, no.3–4, Communication and Cognition, Ghent, 2000, pp.111–131. ‘Far-from-equilibrium’, ‘open’ systems are there distinguished from equilibrium systems which are necessarily ‘closed’ and at ‘rest’, in the context of more appropriately modelling organic, and ultimately human, self-maintenant functionalities and behaviours. What is particularly interesting is how such far-from-equilibrium systems are necessarily dependent upon or even sensitive to their environments in order to maintain (including, most importantly, to contribute to) their far-from-equilibrium conditions. Prima facie; this resonates well with a human being’s capacity to creatively respond to emergent and possibly novel circumstances, within the complex systems in which we daily find ourselves.
should be taken to underestimate the importance of the recognition that a purely formal sense of individuality (including all the things that are traditionally associated with or seem to follow from that, such as self-ascription, self-reference and self-understanding) does indeed seem to serve, and necessarily serve, as such a reference or focal point. Without such individuality, there would be no meaning at all in the way we understand it, simply because there would be no meaning for us. For Simmel at least, such reference is fundamentally necessary for the individual meaning of anything, even the divine. As Simmel observes:

The religious man feels himself fully seized by the divine, as if he were merely a pulse-beat of its life. His own substance is given over unreservedly, if not in a mystical, undifferentiated fusion, to that of the absolute. But in spite of this, in order to give this fusion any significance whatever, he must preserve some sort of self-existence, some sort of personal counter, a differentiated ego, for whom the absorption in this divine all-being is a never ending task.

And just as individuality remains fundamentally if somewhat paradoxically necessary for such absorptive religious experiences, no less is it also the case that both human social being and society similarly manifest a fundamental and irreducible place for human individuality. Consistent with Simmel’s account, human social being seems to emerge as something like an ontological ‘space’ of possibilities, in which individuals are afforded the potential to find themselves as the beings they are, somewhere between objectively and potentially rigidly determined social forms on the one hand and subjectively and ultimately fragmentary individuality on the other. And our way of finding ourselves in this ‘space’ is effectively what constitutes Simmel’s third and last a priori condition, as outlined in the section below.

Third condition: Correlation and the phenomenon of vocation

Lastly, insofar as what makes society possible, Simmel notes that:

The a priori of the individual’s social existence is the fundamental correlation between his life and the society that surrounds him, the integrative function and necessity of his specific character, as it is determined by his personal life, to the life of the whole.

By this, Simmel means that society offers a ‘place’ for the individual on the one hand, which on the other the individual feels a personal ‘calling’ to fulfil. It is interesting in this respect to compare what Simmel has to say on someone’s ‘calling’ or ‘vocation’ with what Max Weber earlier published (in 1905) on the central role someone’s ‘calling’ (in the sense of being divinely and therefore providentially destined for them) came to play in Lutheran and other Protestant thought. Rather than a divinely dictated ‘station’ in life, for Simmel there seems a (in some sense stronger) sense of synthetically derived providence, in that:

34 It is tempting in this respect to see at least some parallels with the necessary individual/personal commitment to which Søren Kierkegaard is attributed as advocating (e.g. in Dreyfus and Jane Rubin, ‘Kierkegaard, Division II, and Later Heidegger’, in the Appendix to Being-in-the-World, p.283 ff.), if anything is to have any real meaning. Notably, this includes religiosity (e.g. versus state organised formalisms). Of course, if such religious meaning must necessarily have reference to the individual and individual meaning, that meaning thereby remains something intensely personal. Consistent with what Simmel claims elsewhere: ‘This is the behavior of the individual soul in and to itself, which does not enter at all into its external relations: its religious movements, which exclusively serve its own salvation or damnation; its devotion to the objective values of knowledge, beauty, significance, which transcend all connections with other people.’ (Simmel, ‘Conflict’, p.81).

35 Simmel, ‘How Is Society Possible?’, p.15.

36 Ibid, pp.18–22.


On the one hand, society within itself produces and offers to the individual a place which – however different in content and delimitation it may be from other places – can be filled by many individuals, and which is, for this reason, something anonymous, as it were. On the other hand, this place, in spite of its general character, is nevertheless taken by the individual on the basis of an inner calling, a qualification felt to be intimately personal.\(^{39}\)

In an ‘ideal’ society for Simmel, there would therefore seem a 1:1 correlation between the objectively ‘given’ social roles, and the subjective needs of individuals to fulfil them. The former are necessarily created, albeit as a result of the objective interplay of manifold individual actions combining together\(^{40}\), within a network of other such objectively created social roles; whilst the latter may be characterised as subjectively held teleological goals. In this ideal correlation, our structural impetus (and individually instantiated ‘drives’) towards social being on the one hand, and towards individuality on the other, are mutually satisfied. However, this remains only an ‘ideal’ for Simmel, as does the related but ‘infinitely simplified and stylized’ ideal bureaucracy. Rather, the necessarily emergent reality is infinitely more complex and messy, containing within it and indeed in some sense being sustained by the apparently irreconcilable subjective/objective oppositions identified above. That reality is a kind of ontological ‘space’, within which an individual attempts to navigate (to continue the spatial metaphor) or (more generally and perhaps more accurately) mediate between social roles which on the one hand may never entirely ‘fit’ who that individual ideally is, and which on the other that individual nevertheless requires for their otherwise fragmentary individuality to cohere.

In graphical terms, the basic ontological structure which is articulated in the above description can be represented as follows (see figure 1\(^{41}\)):

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\(^{39}\) Simmel, ‘How Is Society Possible?’, p.2. It is interesting to note that Simmel says: ‘This image of general society finds a small-scale analogy (infinitely simplified and stylized) in bureaucracy. A bureaucracy consists of a certain order of positions, of a predetermined system of functions. It exists as an ideal structure, irrespective of the particular occupants of these positions.’ (ibid, p.19).

\(^{40}\) In this respect, Simmel claims that whilst ‘Empirical, historical society is…vastly different from a bureaucracy because of its irrational and imperfect elements…Nevertheless, the phenomenological structure of society is the sum of the objective existences and actions of its elements and the interrelations among these existences and actions. It is a system of elements each of which occupies an individual place, a co-ordination of functions and function-centers which have objective and social significance, although they are not always valuable. Purely personal and creative aspects of the ego, its impulses and reflexes, have no place in this system. To put it otherwise: The life of society…takes its course as if each of its elements were predestined for its particular place in it.’ (ibid, pp.19–20; note that the passages quoted have been condensed as shown by the ellipses).

\(^{41}\) Whilst offering this graphic as a useful schema, it is important to appreciate that any rigid social forms/roles to which a society may gravitate may themselves be subject to destruction and alteration (including co-option). One of the best examples of the co-option and extension of a society’s ‘acceptable’ social forms is that of the ‘Molly’ culture of 17th century England (e.g. see K Anthony Appiah, ‘Human Rights and Cosmopolitan Liberalism’, in Human Rights at Harvard: Interdisciplinary Faculty Perspectives on the Human Rights Movement, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1999, p.13). Beginning with the ready-made gender identities of male-female, the ‘Molly’ identity shaped a new gender option for people who were morphologically male ‘to express their sexual desire for other men by feminizing themselves – cross-dressing, and giving each other women’s names, among them Molly, from which the name derives’ (ibid). The cycle of formation, destruction and transcendence of such forms is also central to Simmel’s ‘The Transcendent Character of Life’ (see the translation by Levine, in On Individuality and Social Forms, pp.353–374).
Some Possible Conclusions and Interesting Speculations

As noted at the start of this paper, this understanding of social being would seem to have at least two further implications worthy of further note.

First, when seen in the above light, Simmel’s famous ‘Metropolis’ essay can be read as a ‘working out’ of these dualisms and synthesis as it manifests in the modern/urban/metropolitan way of mass life. It is at once an ontic possibility of the ontological structures of social being and individuality inherent in all historical societies, as well as a refinement or elaboration on those structures in light of this possibility. To this extent, and to go perhaps slightly beyond Simmel towards Heidegger, as a possibility mass life would seem to have a certain telos towards which human ontological structures may, possibly amongst other teloi, naturally inhere. In any case, for Simmel the metropolis is most definitely a development in a ‘play’ of historical cultural forms, in which the question of how an individual preserves autonomy and individuality has come to be of particular focus.

Not only this, but increased complexities of social living, which are seemingly in evidence in both the metropolis as well as mass life in general, suggest a further interesting conclusion. If, as suggested above, the ‘reserving’ or limitation of our individual selves for the sake of playing nice with others, in terms of the social games and interests which concerns us at that time and in that context, is

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foundational for our conception of the present ‘now’, then so would that ‘now’ seem ever more pressing the more complicated and more tightly coupled those interests become. And hence our apparent need, or at least our desire, to know what is happening in that ever present and ever increasingly important ‘now’, which may be seen as feeding an ever more frenzied craving for real-time reporting in modern information and communication technologies.

Perhaps more importantly though, is the possibility that this analysis offers something quite beyond the promise of a general phenomenological approach (or indeed critical methodology) for understanding the tendencies of our current age as somehow peculiar to that age. Rather, if this analysis is of a genuinely ontological structure of human being per se, then it is thereby one which is relevant pan-historically to an understanding of our very social being. In other words, it would seem to provide a conceptual framework which any attempt to understand historically instantiated social being must minimally meet – a genuine meta-narrative. Potentially, this includes a necessary acceptance of certain irreconcilable tensions within that life, as well as the conclusion that any ‘reform’ of that life can only ever be partial (i.e. with respect to the impossible prospect of individuality fully prevailing over form, or vice versa), and then only in the form of an ostensibly oppositional pairing. For example, on this basis it might seem fundamentally problematic that our consumer-based society could ever reform itself from ‘within’ as it were, without some substantive oppositional structure based on principles radically different from those which found current consumerism.

Second, the above analysis of societally bound individuality, and ineliminably individually impelled society, can be seen to be supplemented by the views expressed in Simmel’s late essay ‘The Conflict in Modern Culture’. In that essay, Simmel takes the broader view of the development of historical cultural forms per se (some of the stages of which seem to reappear in Heidegger’s later writings), as themselves a movement between life (read expressive of both individuality and change) affirming principles and the expression but thereby also reification and ultimately stultification of those

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43 An interest which may even be to the detriment of human decision-making abilities. For example, see Karl E Weick, Sensemaking in Organizations, SAGE, Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi, 1995.

44 This includes, of course, an apparently insatiable demand for the most up-to-date information, and related to this, technology or other product, which can help us keep up with the social requirements of the present ‘now’. Furthermore, the insatiable nature of these demands entails that such information or product is quickly dated, and hence that there is also a tendency for quick replacement of said information/product, which may, in this way, also tend to already manifest a certain obsolescence or even disposability. The faddish effect of such social demands, and in particular a concomitant tendency towards a lack of lasting commitment to any one particular issue or action (read fad), is at least resonant with Søren Kierkegaard’s characterisation of his own age as one solely ‘of advertisement and publicity’ (Kierkegaard, The Present Age and Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle, Alexander Dru [tr.], Collins, London, 1962, p.36). It might also be noted that Simmel’s essay on ‘Fashion’ (e.g. in On Individuality and Social Forms, pp.294–323) is itself dedicated to understanding such faddishness as it relates to the establishment and maintenance of both individuality and social groupings, particularly as regards modern mass life.

45 Simmel, ‘The Conflict in Modern Culture’, K Peter Etzkorn (tr.), in On Individuality and Social Forms, pp.375–393.

46 This occurs, for example, when Heidegger contrasts the ‘world picture’ and thereby essence of the modern age from the quite different essences of the Middle Ages and of Ancient Greek Being, in his ‘The Age of the World Picture’. (Published in The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, William Lovitt (tr. and ed.), Harper, New York, 1977, pp.115–154; see especially p.130 ff.).

47 It is interesting to note that these life affirming principles might themselves be characterised in such a way as to suggest their own pair of oppositions, which may also be worthwhile revisiting for either comparison or contrast when it comes to attempting to understand what Heidegger means by ‘death’. In particular, Simmel claims that ‘If, furthermore, as I am convinced, death is immanent in life from the outset, this, too, involves a stepping out of life beyond itself. From its center, life stretches out toward the absolute of life, as it were, and becomes in this direction more-life; but it stretches out toward nothingness as well. As life persists and yet increases itself in one action, so it persists and declines in one action, as a single action.’ (Simmel, ‘The Transcendent Character of Life’, p.369). This seems to exemplify those essentially horizontal aspects of Simmel’s writing to which Jalbert justifiably draws attention in his paper.
principles in an established cultural form. Although the exact form of the latter may be contingent or, in that sense, ontic in nature, the inherent tendency towards such determinate form can be regarded as an ontological feature. Such a reading seems entirely consistent with the above interpretation of the necessarily societally existent individual or ‘self’ as mediating between socially available forms on the one hand (themselves potentially cohered under a broader, dominant cultural rubric) and radical individuality (read as life and change, but thereby in that radical sense also fragmentation) on the other.

If this is correct, then the necessarily societally existent individual or ‘self’ must, ipso facto, be distinguished from that radical individuality or ‘life’ impulse which helps both manifest and thereby delimit that ontological ‘space’ within which such a self is to be found as mediating. But then the question arises: to what extent is Jalbert’s comparison of Simmelian ‘life’ with Heideggerian Dasein actually appropriate, or indeed useful? One might suggest that Jalbert is highlighting this comparison as simply a means of drawing attention to his understanding of Simmel as a transitional figure towards Heidegger’s thinking of Dasein. But whilst this may be true, I would suggest that the comparison leads to an unnecessary confusion. Against this, one might object that the existential ‘choice’ both confronting and foundational to an ‘authentic’ form of being Dasein is not that of some Simmelian, socially mediating self anyway, but something entirely more horizontal, concerning the finitude of human being per se. However, it is precisely this claim, and in particular the apparent assumption that the one excludes the other, which I wish to deny. And it is an alternative account, which sees as more appropriate a comparison between Dasein and Simmelian mediating self, rather than ‘life’, that I now wish to briefly defend.

In this respect, one might recognise that there is no Cartesian ‘subject’ for Heidegger’s Dasein, and thus no ‘subjective’ self in that sense. However, it would be quite erroneous to assume from this that Dasein does not entail something of a (perhaps more Aristotelian-styled) self. Not least, the desirability of ‘being-one’s-self’, in contrast and even opposition to being a They- or One-self (Man-selbst), remains a prominent theme in Being and Time. Admittedly, it is an individual’s confrontation with finitude (i.e. as a limit or horizon to human being per se) which is at least partly characteristic of what ‘calls’ an individual to be an ‘authentic’ self, per Division II of Being and Time. But in confronting ‘the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all’, one cannot just remain what is effectively catatonically frozen in place, in the face of what has earlier been established (in Heidegger’s analysis of ‘Angst’) is the utter collapse of the totality of our worldly involvements. To be, one must act in and otherwise comport oneself with respect to the world. Even if that means sometimes reassessing, in light of our inherent finitude, the social forms and roles which are ‘given’ to us, it is still those forms and roles which we must necessarily consider. This is true even if we hope to find in them the ‘stuff’ of new forms and roles, or of temporarily suspending their hold on us in the hope of being open for previously unconsidered ways of

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48This comparison tends to be throughout Jalbert’s paper, in the way that he draws specific parallels between what Heidegger has to say with respect to Dasein and what Simmel has to say with respect to ‘life’, as in fact foreshadowed in Jalbert’s claim that ‘Despite the fact that Heidegger prefers to talk about Dasein rather than life, he echoes Simmel in a number of ways.’ (Jalbert, p.267). To be entirely fair to Jalbert, Simmel does use ‘life’ in both a ‘relative’ sense of those life-affirming principles which oppose form, as well as an ‘absolute’ sense which encompasses that unified movement of flux-and-form (e.g. see Simmel, ‘The Transcendent Character of Life’, p.368 ff.). In other words, for Simmel ‘life’ has both a reflexive and transcendent character in which it continually overcomes itself. However, such statements as Simmel makes in this respect still seem congruent with an essentially vital or even physiological understanding of ‘life’, in which it constantly seeks out new forms, consistent even with the Darwinian or Lamarckian theories which well predated Simmel’s own writings.

49Which is to say, a self which shares certain of the socially mediating features explored by Aristotle (e.g. in The Nicomachean Ethics, J A K Thomson [tr.], Hugh Tredennick [revision and notes] and Jonathan Barnes [intro.], Penguin, London, 2004 [revised ed.]).

50Heidegger, Being and Time, p.307 (H262).

51Ibid, p.231 (H186).
being. It is manifestly not sufficient just to ‘dwell’ with those previous forms in recognition of that finitude, because that very recognition demands action.\(^5^2\)

Not only does this include a reconsideration of both our own personal and shared histories, but such reflection is, in at least some sense, inherently disruptive in character with respect to the ‘temporal stretch’ of life as it has been or is usually lived. Possibly per Simmel and pace Jalbert, the possibility of such historical reflection does seem that it genuinely, and again in some sense, ‘disrupts the temporal stretch of life as it is actually lived’\(^5^3\). In a certain sense, even ‘authentic’ Heideggerian reflection would seem to be temporally disruptive – i.e. with respect to everyday temporality. In this respect, it is incredibly important to appreciate the fact that ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ forms of Heideggerian understanding are not to be equated with what might be considered ‘genuine’ or ‘not genuine’\(^5^4\). Both of the former forms have their ‘place’, as it were, within Dasein’s way of being-in-the-world. Specifically, whilst an ‘inauthentic’ form of understanding might be perfectly acceptable, perhaps even necessary, for everyday, ‘forgetful’ being-in-the-world, circumstances may at least sometimes demand a more primordially ‘authentic’ understanding, in order to mediate choices or even breakdowns in that everyday way of life. Such an understanding might reasonably be thought to be inherently disruptive in character. One has, quite literally, to stop and think, viz. reflect on one’s own factical thrownness and inherited potentials (and also, inextricably, futural possibilities and horizons) in the ‘authentic’ moment (Augenblick), before acting in the world again.

In these respects, and pace other interpretations, Dasein might indeed be more appropriately identified with that necessarily mediating transcendent self, in the double sense of both the individuals we are and the way we are those individuals, as well as the individuals and ways it is possible for us to become. And if Simmel and Heidegger have anything important to say to us in our current age, it is just this one consistent message: in order to become, and thereby remain the transcending selves which are each of our shared heritages, we must ensure we remain open for those possibilities. And this requires that we take action to ensure that our own society, with its ever-so apparently successful forms and roles, does not thereby foreclose on those very possibilities.

\(^{5^2}\)In this respect, an almost-Sartrean call for individual action and individuated responsibility would seem warranted (i.e. even if one disagrees with all other aspects of Sartre’s [mis]appropriation of Heidegger).

\(^{5^3}\)Jalbert, p.276. Significantly, much would seem to depend on what Jalbert means here by ‘actually’; and, of course, how Simmel’s and Heidegger’s respective temporal analyses are themselves to be understood in this context.

\(^{5^4}\)One of the clearest expression of this occurs when Heidegger says ‘On the other hand, authentic understanding, no less than that which is inauthentic, cannot be either genuine or not genuine.’ (Heidegger, Being and Time, p.186, [H146]).