

NEO-KANTIANISM AND GEORG SIMMEL'S INTERPRETATION OF KANT*

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This essay explores the development of Georg Simmel's interpretation of Immanuel Kant's philosophy in the context of neo-Kantianism and its preoccupation with the question of unity in modern diversity. It argues that the neo-Kantian movement can be divided into two periods: in the first, unity was addressed with regard to Kant's epistemology; in the second period, the main issue was the overall coherence of Kantian teaching. Simmel, who belonged to the younger generation of neo-Kantians, absorbed the conclusions of the previous generation that purged Kantian epistemology from its metaphysical foundations related to the noumenal world. Yet he did not share the views of his peers who considered Kant to be the philosopher of cultural plurality. On the contrary, he argued that Kant's system is thoroughly intellectualistic, and that ethics, aesthetics and religion within it are subordinated to logic. At the same time, his own philosophy presupposed cultural plurality akin to that of other neo-Kantians. In other words, Simmel abandoned Kant in order to develop his own version of neo-Kantianism.

INTRODUCTION

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) was one of the most perceptive and integrative thinkers of his time. He absorbed the intellectual languages of his tradition more comprehensively than any of his contemporaries. Thus he can be regarded as a synoptic figure who assists us in making sense of this tradition: through the hermeneutic interaction between the whole and the part, the overall intellectual context elucidates the meaning of his thought and, conversely, his thought is brought to reflect on the meaning of its context.¹

* This article is part of my research on Georg Simmel's philosophy supported by the Israeli Science Foundation (grant no 220/05) and by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

¹ My methodological position is outlined in Efraim Podoksik, "How Is Modern Intellectual History Possible?", *European Political Science*, 9/3 (2010), 304–15.

On the most general level, the story of German intellectual life of that period can be summarized in terms of a quest to resolve a specific dilemma: how might one reconcile the ideal of universal harmony with the axiological independence of one or more fragments which are otherwise supposed to serve this harmony? This issue is alluded to in the formula “unity in diversity” and in the set of questions relating to the interaction between the whole and the part. It was broadly acknowledged in the nineteenth century but acquired a nearly existential significance only in Germany. Hence it can serve as a master key, so to speak, to decipher what was going on in German intellectual life at that time.

The story, as I see it, runs as follows. The intellectual tradition that puts at its centre a preoccupation with the question of unity amid the growing differentiation of intellectual activities and social forms begins in parallel with *Blütezeit*, lasts for over a century and can be roughly divided into three periods. The first period frames the intellectual task: to find a way to combine unity and variety. The second period—the mid-nineteenth century—is one of technicians: intellectuals who more or less uncritically absorb the ideal of synthesis posited by earlier generations. They engage in a variety of intellectual practices, which find their cultural justification in conformity to the ideal of ultimate unity. However, the relative success of this enterprise, as each of those intellectual spheres reaches methodological maturity, paradoxically generates a new anxiety. For as culture continues to diversify, the ideal of unity does not appear to be any closer; it is like the horizon, constantly distant, possibly even receding. The realization of the illusory character of this unity signifies the third period, which lasts roughly from the 1870s to World War I. Growing discontent with the very ideal of synthesis provokes a renewed philosophical conversation on the issue of interaction between unity and its fragments, until the entire quest is all but abandoned as obsolete in the aftermath of the war.²

This storyline was typical of almost every significant sphere of intellectual activity in Germany, be it religion, the social sciences, aesthetic theories, historicism or philosophy. In this essay I focus specifically on the philosophical movement of neo-Kantianism and on Simmel’s relation to it. Neo-Kantianism belongs to the last two periods of the story, exemplifying how straightforward attempts to maintain the ideal of unity in variety, which characterize the work of the mid-nineteenth-century generation, evolved into anxiety about irreconcilable plurality. Simmel’s own intellectual development replicates this story in miniature with the broadest amplitude: shifting from confident optimism in the ability of Kantian philosophy to serve as the basis for the modern unified world view (optimism that was common among his teachers belonging to the older

² For the detailed exposition see Efraim Podoksik, “*Bildung*: A Tradition in Crisis,” unpublished draft.

generation) to a break with Kant—a step which most of his fellow neo-Kantians were not prepared to make.

WHAT WAS NEO-KANTIANISM?

In the anglophone world Georg Simmel is known mainly as a sociologist, as most of his philosophical works remain untranslated. Yet he was one of the most acute philosophical minds of his time, whose interpretation of Kant greatly influenced his students and a wider audience. In fact, Simmel's intellectual career began with Kant. Kant's theory of matter was the subject of his student dissertation, for which he was awarded the Royal Prize in 1880, and on the basis of which he was promoted to a doctoral degree.³ His subsequent *Habilitation* essay analysed Kant's ideas of synthetic judgement, pure perception and pure will and was regarded by the examination committee as a better work than his initial study, on the origins of music.⁴ Simmel's first course as *Privatdozent* at Berlin University was on Kant's ethics, and he continued teaching Kant for many years.⁵ Kant was also a recurring theme in many of his publications, culminating in *Kant: Sixteen Lectures Delivered at Berlin University*, delivered in the winter semester of 1902–3 and published as a book in 1904.⁶ *Kant* was Simmel's most popular work; none of his other books enjoyed four editions during his lifetime.⁷

In addition to his promotion of Kant's philosophy as a teacher and writer, Simmel regularly cooperated with Kant scholars: he contributed an article on Kant's philosophy to the first issue of *Kant-Studien*, became a life member of the Kant Society and was among the founders of the philosophical journal *LOGOS*, perceived as the tribune of the south-western Baden neo-Kantian school, and he was initially apprehensive that he would be perceived as a representative of that particular school.⁸

³ The first part of the dissertation was published as Georg Simmel, *Das Wesen der Materie nach Kant's Physischer Monadologie* (1881), in *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*, 24 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1989–) (hereafter *GSG*), 1: 9–41. See Klaus Christian Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel: In Theoriebeziehungen und sozialen Bewegungen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), 42–9.

⁴ Michael Landmann, "Bausteine zur Biographie," in K. Gassen and M. Landmann, eds., *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel* (Berlin, 1958), 11–33, at 20; Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, 51–77.

⁵ Gassen and Landmann, *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel*, 345–9.

⁶ Georg Simmel, *Kant: Sechzehn Vorlesungen gehalten an der Berliner Universität*, in *GSG*, 9: 7–226.

⁷ The second edition appeared in 1905, the third in 1913, and the fourth in 1918.

⁸ These worries were exaggerated. His contemporaries did perceive Simmel as a neo-Kantian, but they also recognized the peculiar nature of his engagement with Kant. In the

But what kind of a neo-Kantian was he, after all? “Neo-Kantianism” was a blend of activities of at least three different kinds.⁹ First, it was a scholarly movement, the aim of which was to pursue a detailed philological, historical and interpretative study of Kant’s philosophy. Second, it was an attempt at reformulating, developing and improving Kant’s philosophical system. Finally, it was a public philosophical movement which aimed at creating its own cultural world view. Simmel’s work encompasses all three aspects. When one mentions Simmel’s “neo-Kantianism,” one is usually referring only to his cultural–philosophical contribution, without considering his role in the two other aspects of neo-Kantianism: the interpretation and modification of Kant’s philosophy. Yet only by considering these can Simmel’s peculiar place within neo-Kantianism be made clear.

Simmel’s approach to Kant can be split into two periods. In the first, he considered Kant not only as a great philosophical mind, but also as the creator of the only adequate intellectual basis for resolving the contradictions of the modern era. In the second period, he came to believe that Kant’s response to the problems of modernity was not fully satisfactory, although he continued to hold him in great esteem.

This turn in Simmel’s position happened between 1896 and 1902; that is, between the publication of his essay “What Is Kant to Us?” (1896), in which he outlined in detail his initial position, and the public lectures on Kant (1902), in which he voiced his new attitude. If one were to look for a more precise date of the change, I would suggest 1899. Two things happened then. First, Simmel stopped offering annual classes on Kant. From now on he would lecture on Kant only occasionally.¹⁰ Second, in the same year he published the essay “Kant and Goethe,” in which for the first time he spoke about an alternative way—Goethe’s—to resolve the contradictions of modernity.¹¹

eleventh edition (1916) of Friedrich Ueberweg’s *Outline of the History of Philosophy*, its editor Konstantin Oesterreich acknowledged that Simmel represented a separate trend in neo-Kantianism: “the relativistic modification of criticism.” Friedrich Ueberweg, *Grundriß der Geschichte der Philosophie*, part 4, *Vom Beginn des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts bis auf die Gegenwart*, 11th edn (Berlin, 1916), 398–401. On Simmel’s activities with LOGOS see Rüdiger Kramme, “Brücke und Trost? Zu Georg Simmels Engagement für den ‘Logos,’” *Simmel Newsletter*, 3/1 (1993), 65. His *Kant-Studien* article is “Ueber den Unterschied der Wahrnehmungs- und der Erfahrungsurteile: Ein Deutungsversuch,” in *GSG*, 5: 235–45.

⁹ On neo-Kantianism see Klaus Christian Köhnke, *The Rise of Neo-Kantianism: German Academic Philosophy between Idealism and Positivism* (Cambridge, 1991); Helmut Holzhey, “Der Neukantianismus,” in Helmut Holzhey and W. Rödel, *Die Philosophie des ausgehenden 19. und des 20. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 2, *Neukantianismus, Idealismus, Realismus, Phänomenologie* (Munich, 2004), 11–129.

¹⁰ For example, in the winter semester 1909–10. See Gassen and Landmann, *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel*, 348.

¹¹ Georg Simmel, “Kant und Goethe,” in *GSG*, 5: 455–78.

I claim that it is Simmel's disenchantment with central tenets of Kant's philosophical world view which led him to ally himself more closely with the cultural–philosophical project of neo-Kantianism. His philosophical development can thus be described as a departure from Kant towards neo-Kantianism.

EARLY NEO-KANTIANISMS

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Kant's philosophy attracted a great deal of attention in Germany. The renewed interest had begun in the late 1850s and the 1860s with the publication of important studies by Kuno Fischer, Otto Liebmann and F. A. Lange. It spread in the 1870s and 1880s, the term “neo-Kantianism” first appearing around 1875.¹² In 1896 Hans Vaihinger established the journal *Kant-Studien*, and shortly afterwards (1904) the Kant Society was founded. In the last two decades of the *Kaiserreich*, neo-Kantianism established itself as a leading philosophical current in Germany.

The cultural project of neo-Kantianism in general can be described as an attempt to find in Kant the foundations for restoring the unity of the world view vis-à-vis diversified modern civilization. The diagnosis of modernity was disunity, and Kant was supposed to have provided the answer to this disunity. But the kind of answer expected from Kant depended on the kind of disunity perceived to exist in modernity.

The first period of the Kantian revival (late 1850s–1880s) was affected by the legacy of Kant's reception by the first generation of post-Kantian Idealists, the generation of Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer. The specific kind of disunity that troubled these Idealists was that between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. The central initial question of post-Kantian German Idealism was the question of dualism between the world as appearance and the world as it really is, symbolized by the famous expression “thing-in-itself.”

Neo-Kantians attacked this preoccupation with the thing-in-itself, which they considered futile. They believed that the emphasis on the thing-in-itself turned Kant into a metaphysician, whereas the most valuable aspect of his philosophy, the one that ensured its coherence, was his rejection of metaphysics. Kant's philosophy, in their eyes, was critical rather than metaphysical. It focused on what governs our experience and not on what may lurk behind it. These neo-Kantians regarded “thing-in-itself” as a “transcendental” (in the Kantian sense) rather than metaphysical term. In other words, “thing-in-itself” is a term evoked to outline the limits of possible experience rather than to point to things that

¹² Helmut Holzhey, “Neukantianismus,” in J. Ritter and K. Gründer, eds., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Darmstadt, 1984), 747–8.

may exist beyond our experience. “The ‘thing in itself’ is a mere limit-concept,” claimed F. A. Lange,¹³ while Hermann Cohen called it “ominous,” arguing that, from the standpoint of our experience, it should be considered as nothing.¹⁴

Having thus got rid of the obnoxious thing-in-itself and the set of associated problems (antinomies, Ideas, God, etc.), neo-Kantians concentrated on what they regarded both as the heart of Kant’s theory and as his most relevant philosophical idea: that our mind always grasps the world actively, and that the forms in which the world appears to our perception and to our understanding exist a priori. It is impossible for us to experience the world other than in time, in space, under the category of causality, etc. The purpose of philosophy is to outline the presuppositions under which the world can be known by experience and thus to determine the proper sphere of modern science.

Neo-Kantians diverged in their views as to why our experience is determined by a priori forms, and why specifically by these and not other forms. The earlier generation (for example Liebmann and initially Lange) offered a physiological explanation, arguing that the a priori is determined by our biological organization.¹⁵ Certain categories are necessary for the human race, whereas other intelligent beings may possess a different system of categories. Cohen, by contrast, believed that the categories possessed logical necessity: for all mental organisms there is only one way to pursue truly scientific knowledge. Kant’s own view in this respect is a subject of historical interpretation, though it appears that he did not clearly differentiate between the two positions.¹⁶ But this did not have to concern neo-Kantians, whose aim, even as they proclaimed the importance of studying Kant’s texts scrupulously, was mainly to reformulate and improve upon Kant. The task of the new scholarship was precisely to return to Kant’s basic problems in order to solve them better than Kant himself had done.¹⁷ As Wilhelm Windelband would later say, “to understand Kant means to surpass Kant.”¹⁸

The way in which Kant was surpassed regarding the question of a priori was this: Kant himself believed that the system of categories outlined by him was complete and eternally valid. But neo-Kantians could not accept this closed

¹³ Friedrich Albert Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutungen in der Gegenwart*, 2nd edn, 2 vols. (Iserlohn, 1875), 2: 49.

¹⁴ Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, 2nd edn (Berlin, 1885), 167.

¹⁵ For example, Friedrich Albert Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutungen in der Gegenwart*, 1st edn (Iserlohn, 1866), 264.

¹⁶ Manfred Pascher, *Einführung in den Neukantianismus: Kontext—Grundpositionen—Praktische Philosophie* (Munich, 1997), 55.

¹⁷ See Otto Liebmann, *Kant und die Epigonen: Eine kritische Abhandlung* (Stuttgart, 1865).

¹⁸ Wilhelm Windelband, *Präludien: Aufsätze und Reden zur Einführung in die Philosophie*, 2 vols. (Tübingen, 1911), 1: iv.

system; they considered it inadequate and outdated. It did not matter whether the a priori was a function of our biological organization or of logical necessity. In both instances Kant's system was finite, for he did not foresee any significant changes either in the organization of human beings or in the Aristotelian and Newtonian basis of the natural sciences; and in both instances Kant would be challenged by the end of the nineteenth century. First, evolutionary biology implied that the contemporary form of the human race was not the final or the only possible one, that new forms would develop in time, and that consequently the nature of experiencing by future human beings may differ from ours. Second, and more central to the history of neo-Kantianism, the principles of natural and exact sciences significantly evolved, which allowed Cohen to suggest that Kant had based his a priori system on the scientific situation that was becoming increasingly irrelevant. Science is an open-ended activity. The science of the future would modify the principles universally accepted in Cohen's time, just as the science of his time modified the principles of Newtonian physics. For this reason, it is impossible to formulate a finite system of a priori categories. The system must remain open enough to accommodate future scientific progress.¹⁹

At the same time, neo-Kantians did not consider this criticism to be a repudiation of Kant. On the contrary, they saw themselves as completing Kant's work. For them, the most significant thing was, first, that Kant's philosophy presupposed unity rather than dualism. And second, this unity was quintessentially modern, because it welcomed variety and open-endedness. Kant paved the way towards a unified philosophical world view that could accommodate open-endedness and progress. Thus, in the eyes of early neo-Kantians, his theory entailed, in principle, an adequate response to the intellectual demands of the modern age; it built a unified system valid for the condition of modern variety.

SIMMEL'S INTERPRETATION OF KANT'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

The project of reformulating Kantian doctrine was all but over by the early 1880s, the time of Simmel's first intellectual endeavours. His understanding of Kant's epistemology and metaphysics was preconditioned by this reformulation. His initial view of Kant developed in the context of the interpretation advanced by early neo-Kantians. In his eyes, as in the eyes of many of his contemporaries, this was not *an* interpretation but *the* interpretation: the last word of scholarship.

¹⁹ Pascher, *Einführung in den Neukantianismus*, 56.

For Simmel, Kant's philosophy is mainly the philosophy of knowledge and experience. Simmel does everything he can to remove any remnants of the noumenal world from Kant's philosophy. In "What Is Kant to Us?", for example, he argues that Kant's teaching about the thing-in-itself is generally misunderstood. It is commonly believed that Kant argued that "I"—our mind—has something beyond itself which is fundamentally different from it: the world of objects to which one is denied direct access. According to this belief, "there exists an unbridgeable abyss between representation and the thing-in-itself, and the former can never reach the latter, always remaining just itself."²⁰ This understanding, however, is false. The reason for our inability to know the thing-in-itself is not the incommensurability of our mind with what lies outside it (for thinking has no limits and can in principle push towards things-in-themselves); it is, rather, that pure thinking, detached from sensual perception, cannot be a means of knowledge at all, for the only existing reality is the one already entailed in sensual appearance. "This mere appearance of the world that we see is not an illusion or error," for "the sensible, intelligibly ordered representation *is* precisely reality."²¹ It is all the more certain to us, as we do not imagine anything beyond it:

thus the stable world's apparent evaporation and uprooting through reduction to a sensible representation actually bestows on it a kind of stability and certainty which it never had as long as one assumed as the real and true world a world of things in themselves which exists beyond our senses and can be reached only in thought.²²

This is the gist of Simmel's interpretation of Kant's theory of knowledge and experience: the very notion that the world is appearance determined by forms entailed in our own mind actually bestows upon reality an earlier unachievable degree of certainty and thus frees us from the danger of scepticism. The radical subjectivism of Kant leads to the radical assertion of objectivity and of certainty with regard to the known world. One can speak meaningfully about objectivity only once the thing-in-itself has been deprived of its status as an independent object.

According to Simmel's interpretation, from which he never deviates, the question of the existence of something beyond the realm of experience is simply irrelevant to the Kantian critique of reason.²³ Like other neo-Kantians, Simmel is well aware that this was not exactly the view of the historical Kant, who was very interested in the problem of God's existence and other "metaphysical" subjects. Yet Simmel believes that these questions lost their appeal for modern man, for

²⁰ GSG, 5: 152.

²¹ Ibid., 153.

²² Ibid., 153–4.

²³ See e.g. Simmel, *Kant*, 86.

whom the critical aspect of Kant's philosophy is of greater consequence. It is this critical aspect which constitutes the philosophical essence of Kant's ideas.²⁴ Therefore it is important not to succumb to the "terrible danger of converting into a *world* the absolutely unrecognizable [quality] of the thing-in-itself."²⁵ This substantialization of the thing-in-itself was merely an unfortunate error of Kant: "The crossing of self-imposed limits which is committed by Kant through the metaphysical use of the thing-in-itself is based on the fact that he solidifies its purely functional meaning into a substantive being."²⁶

The relevant context for the term "function" vis-à-vis "substance," as they are used in *Kant*, is the school of "empiricism" (or "empirio-criticism") of Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius.²⁷ It was Mach who popularized the idea that modern physics replaced the older understanding of matter as substance with a newer notion of matter as energy. By using these terms Simmel was pushing his interpretation of Kant into a strongly empiricist direction, apparently deviating from the orthodox neo-Kantian position. In the intellectual context of the late nineteenth century, Mach's critical positivism was seen to be in opposition to neo-Kantianism, which focused on the logical rather than the sensual presuppositions of knowledge. Simmel regarded this opposition as unfortunate and considered both approaches complementary. He wrote that

the intellectual-historical situation in the 1870s, in which the renaissance of Kantian theory occurred, meant that one perceived in it above all its opposition to ordinary empiricism without properly emphasizing that actually in respect of the *practice* of understanding it did not depart that far from empiricism.²⁸

Instead of postulating the dualism of empirical perception, on the one hand, and of necessary mathematical and logical judgements, on the other, Simmel thus described them as the two poles of possible experience: pure perception as its lowest limit, and pure understanding as its highest limit. All judgements of experience occur within these limits, being in fact mixtures of perception and understanding in different proportions.²⁹ There is, then, no dichotomous distinction between valid objective experience and sensual perception. Valid

²⁴ Ibid., 85.

²⁵ Ibid., 180, original emphasis.

²⁶ Ibid., 182.

²⁷ Cf. Gideon Freudenthal, "Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff als Zivilisationstheorie bei Georg Simmel und Ernst Cassirer," in L. Bauer and K. Hamberger, eds., *Gesellschaft denken: Eine erkenntnistheoretische Standortbestimmung der Sozialwissenschaften* (Wien, 2002), 251–76.

²⁸ Simmel, *Kant*, 56, original emphasis.

²⁹ Ibid., 55.

objective experience means merely the *guarantee* of the repetition of sensual perception for everyone and at all times.³⁰

This empiricist bias does not, however, put Simmel outside the neo-Kantian tradition. Some other prominent neo-Kantians too, especially those with a scientific bent, such as Helmholtz and Riehl, were strongly influenced by empiricism. In addition, in Simmel's texts this empiricist side coexists with another motive: considering the mind as an active construction of reality. This motive was characteristic of more stringent currents in neo-Kantianism, represented, for example, by the Marburg school of Cohen and Paul Natorp.

One of the central tasks of Marburg neo-Kantians was to purge Kantian teaching of any elements of passivity, or of receptivity.³¹ For if the mind is just a passive perceiver of external reality, then the question—what is reality in itself?—is not eliminated. Therefore these thinkers suggested that even time and space (that is, those a priori forms which, according to Kant, are perceived intuitively and not conceptually) are nothing other than functions of the active mind itself. This is exactly the line Simmel pursues to its extreme. He describes space as an activity of experiencing. According to him, it would be false to say that we exist in space. Rather, it is the mind's activity which is spatial. And this is what actually makes space perfectly "objective": "space possesses the entire reality about which one can speak at all within the limits of our knowledge, precisely because it is the form and condition of our empirical representations."³² Similarly, time is "the form of self-perception, of the knowledge of one's own self."³³ In other words, as Simmel says in the fourth edition of *Kant* (1918), the essence of Kantian Idealism lies not in the formula "the world is my representation [*die Welt ist meine Vorstellung*], but in a more profound one: the world is my [activity of] representing [*die Welt ist mein Vorstellen*]."³⁴

Yet, again, this formula does not presuppose any subjectivism. On the contrary, it bestows complete certainty on our experience. Already in the first edition of *Kant* Simmel claims that the Kantian subject "is definitely not personal, definitely not the 'soul'."³⁵ Kant succeeds in combining the subjective and the objective into a fully coherent whole: "After subjectivity and objectivity have thus become for him the [opposite] poles of the world of knowledge, he bends them together

³⁰ Ibid., 51–2.

³¹ Paul Natorp, "Kant und die Marburger Schule," *Kant-Studien*, 17/2 (1912), 193–221.

³² Simmel, *Kant*, 83.

³³ Ibid., 94.

³⁴ Ibid., 61.

³⁵ Ibid., 71.

again.”³⁶ Kant's teaching substitutes representations of the things for the things themselves. Yet by this “the world is intellectualized, it is not subjectivized.”³⁷

Later, in the third edition (1913), this point is reinforced by an additional statement that the relevant conscience in experience is not that of an individual but the unity of conscience as such, which is

not individual, not force-like [*kraftmäßig*], but is the meaning, the form of the mental coherence of the contents of the world, coherence that resides in the currently active individual, similar to how the logical meaning of a written sentence resides in material pieces with that sentence.³⁸

Thus even in his later writings Simmel continues to follow the initial programme of the neo-Kantian movement in general and of Marburg scholars in particular: that of removing any remnants of dualism from Kant's epistemology. Whenever he senses the danger of dualism sneaking back in, he speaks against it. For example, without naming him directly he criticizes Vaihinger's interpretation of Kant. In 1911 Vaihinger published *The Philosophy of As If*, in which he argued that human knowledge advances by inventing convenient fictions: mental tools employed to acquire a knowledge of reality. A significant portion of the treatise was dedicated to Kant and his usage of the “as-if” formula.³⁹ It is to this image of Kant as an “as-if” philosopher that Simmel replied in his 1913 edition of *Kant*:

This category of “as if”, introduced by Kant among philosophical methods, was proclaimed as the necessary fiction for human understanding and action, a conscious self-deception, so to speak, which is a stage on the way towards what is theoretically and practically correct. I consider this to be a misconception . . . It can appear as fiction only because we are used to presenting our elements of knowledge as the harsh and extraneous alternative: subjective or objective. As a matter of fact, this structure belongs to a third layer which cannot be divided into those two, but is rather a self-sufficient synthetic unity of them.⁴⁰

In Simmel's eyes, the major achievement of Kant's philosophy was to reach unity out of extreme dualism. This unity had to be guarded.

Another aspect in which Simmel followed the neo-Kantian interpretation was the notion of a priori. Like other neo-Kantians, he considered the idea of the synthetic a priori one of the most important and promising elements of Kantian teaching, and like them he criticized Kant's specific scheme of a priori categories.

³⁶ Ibid., 69.

³⁷ Ibid., 103.

³⁸ Ibid., 62.

³⁹ Hans Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob: System der theoretischen, praktischen und religiösen Fiktionen der Menschheit auf Grund eines idealistischen Positivismus* (Berlin, 1911). On Kant see 613–733.

⁴⁰ Simmel, *Kant*, 25.

The history of knowledge, argued Simmel, can be reduced to two contrasting tendencies. One is governed by “the architectonic instinct,” which attempts to reduce all parts of our knowledge to a closed system.⁴¹ The other and more modern tendency, of which the quintessential expression is the theory of evolution, sees the world as an incessant development, an endless line rather than a circle. Kant’s view is a surprising mixture of both. On the one hand, he postulates that the world given to our sensual experiences is infinite, and so knowledge of it develops endlessly. On the other hand, this endless development of knowledge is governed by the systematic structure of our mind. The satisfaction of the architectonic inclination is thus achieved not in extraneous reality but within the mind itself, whereas the developmental inclination can satisfy itself in an endless exploration of the world.⁴²

According to Simmel, this solution was a stroke of genius; sadly it became unsatisfactory for the modern mind. There is no reason why the mind’s structure itself should remain closed and limited, and why the infinite development attributed to the world should not also be attributed to the forms of our knowledge.⁴³ The system of a priori should become more flexible, developing together with advancing knowledge. It should assign “to each domain of experience its general norms and forms.”⁴⁴ On a number of occasions Simmel tried himself to develop new a priori postulates for specific sorts of knowledge, such as historical knowledge or social knowledge.⁴⁵

With regard to the origin of the a priori, Simmel also seems to follow the general neo-Kantian approach, as his suggestions vacillate between the two aforementioned possibilities: that the a priori is determined either by our physiological organization or by the logic of scientific inquiry. The former position is most explicitly presented in “On the Relation of the Theory of Selection to Epistemology,” an article published in 1895 in *Archiv für systematische Philosophie*, edited by Natorp.⁴⁶ Simmel suggested there a synthesis between pragmatism and the evolution theory. The truthfulness of our knowledge is based on its usefulness. Usefulness is the primary category. The objection to this view would be that it appears to advocate arbitrariness in knowledge: truth is subject

⁴¹ GSG, 5: 158.

⁴² Simmel, *Kant*, 43.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁴ GSG, 5: 150.

⁴⁵ See Georg Simmel, *The Problems of the Philosophy of History: An Epistemological Essay*, trans. G. Oakes (New York, 1977), 42–51 (Simmel, *Kant*, 237–48); Simmel, “How Is Society Possible?,” in Kurt H. Wolff, ed., *Essays on Sociology, Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New York, 1959), 337–56 (GSG, 11: 42–61).

⁴⁶ Georg Simmel, “Ueber eine Beziehung der Selectionstheorie zur Erkenntnistheorie,” in GSG, 5: 62–74.

to our subjective desires. Yet, in Simmel's view, this is an erroneous objection. The emphasis on usefulness does not need to presuppose subjectivity. In order to explain why this is so, Simmel draws an analogy with Kant's philosophy. The fact that, for Kant, "space" is not some independent reality but is embedded in the process of intuition itself does not make it any less objective or real. Similarly, the requirement of usefulness does not lead to epistemological chaos. On the contrary, the process of evolution has established for us norms of "truth" that we recognize as objectively valid and from which we cannot absolve ourselves at our own discretion:

The dualism between the world as appearance as it logically–theoretically exists for us and the world as that reality which responds to our practical action is removed by the fact that those forms of thought which produce the world as representation are also determined by the practical actions and counteractions that are shaped, in accordance with evolutionary necessities, by our mental as well as our bodily constitution.⁴⁷

Simmel goes on to suggest that evolutionism can be the postulate of the Kantian world view. The validity of Kant's system does not originate in abstract logical necessity, he argues, but is rather a result of the evolutionary development of the human race. Our experience today is indeed governed by the limits drawn by Kant. But this is only because in the course of the evolution these specific limits turned out to be most useful for our existence.

This radical evolutionism is not characteristic of Simmel's thought as a whole. The article emerged from the philosophical explorations of a younger Simmel, and the position outlined in it was partly abandoned by him later. In *Kant* he did not venture into the exploration of the biological "in-itself" of our experience, but instead took a rather more standard line. The Kantian a priori is described there not as a product of the biologically conditioned state of the human organism, but as an abstraction derived from the practice of existing sciences. Yet this interpretation was no less neo-Kantian, as it looked similar to the view of Cohen, who argued that the a priori was based on logical necessity.⁴⁸

In any case, let the nuances of Simmel's view of Kant's epistemology be as they may, his principal position reflected the line of mainstream neo-Kantianism. His interpretation was based on two major ideas. First, there is no irreconcilable dualism in Kant's theory of knowledge. Second, the specific form that this theory takes in Kant's writings is out of date and should be modified in accordance with

⁴⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁸ On Simmel's interpretation of Kant's epistemology, especially in relation to that of Cohen, see Heinrich Adolf, *Erkenntnistheorie auf dem Weg zur Metaphysik: Interpretation, Modifikation und Überschreitung des Kantischen Apriorikonzepts bei Georg Simmel* (Munich, 2002), 59–94.

the state of modern knowledge. But whatever modifications might be required, it is difficult to overestimate the cultural–philosophical significance of Kant’s theory. Kant provides a response to intellectual discrepancies created by the modern age. Before him, early modern thinking was torn between rationalism and sensualism. Pushing both elements to their extremes, Kant managed to create a true synthesis, a true unity. He showed the way to perform “the *unification* of the manifold.”⁴⁹ Simmel might have had reservations about some details in Kant’s world view, but, especially in his younger years, he considered Kant’s philosophy in general as *the* outline for the philosophy of modernity and his method of thinking (even when used in a very non-Kantian way in the context of the theory of evolution) as *the* way to find unity in variety.

KANT AND THE PLURALITY OF CULTURAL FORMS

Simmel almost never deviated from his appraisal of Kant’s *theory of experience*. Although doubts about Kant’s epistemology crept into the 1918 edition of *Kant*, where Simmel suggested that “at the foundation of a priori . . . there lurks a hidden scepticism towards life,” on the whole he tended to grant Kant his due with regard to this aspect of his philosophy.⁵⁰ Yet in the late 1890s Simmel began to modify his reading of other aspects of Kant’s teaching, sounding more sceptical about whether the Kantian kind of “unity in variety” was sufficiently encompassing to provide the comprehensive response to modern disunity. At that point Simmel’s interpretation of Kant began to diverge from that of many of his fellow neo-Kantians. In order to see in what way Simmel differed from other neo-Kantians, let us examine some developments which occurred in neo-Kantianism from the 1880s onwards.

One can notice from that time a certain redirection of attention of many neo-Kantians from critical philosophy towards ethics, driven by the hope to develop a positive world view on the basis of Kant’s teaching. The entire Kantian system begins to be perceived as directed towards the questions of morality, and this perception finds support in the Kantian formula of “the primacy of practical reason.”⁵¹ Already in 1877 Cohen referred to ethics as the safe ground to which experience steers itself as its last anchor.⁵² And in 1881 Friedrich Paulsen, in his essay “What Can Kant Be to Us?”, assigned to Kant a crucial moral–cultural

⁴⁹ Simmel, *Kant*, 65, original emphasis.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵¹ See Immanuel Kant, “On the Primacy of Pure Practical Reason and Its Connection with Speculative Reason,” in Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. M. J. Gregor (Cambridge, 1996), 236–8.

⁵² Hermann Cohen, *Kants Begründung der Ethik* (Berlin, 1877), 271.

significance. He argued that during the preceding decades the German nation had lost its unifying idea, and expressed the hope that a future philosophy built on Kantian foundations would restore the unity of the national ideal and thus become the leader of the nation. The questions to deal with, however, do not pertain to epistemology but to faith and morality.⁵³

It is sometimes argued that the main point of difference between the two leading schools of neo-Kantianism—the Marburg school represented by Cohen and Natorp and the south-western (Baden) school represented by Windelband and Rickert—is the weight assigned to different aspects of Kant's philosophy; that while the latter attributed greater significance to the questions of value and morality, the former focused on Kant's logic and its role in the foundation of the natural sciences. This account cannot be considered satisfactory and it was, in fact, challenged by commentators.⁵⁴ Neither school posited a sharp dichotomy: ethics or knowledge. Cohen and Natorp professed keen interest in moral philosophy and in practical issues arising out of it, whereas Windelband and Rickert paid serious attention to general epistemological questions (they used the terms “norm” and “value” as meta-concepts governing every aspect of Kant's philosophy—epistemology no less than morality).⁵⁵

A gradual shift towards exploration of the foundations of the Kantian ethics took place in both schools. The major difference seems to lie rather in the way they addressed new questions that arose as a result of their growing attention to ethics. As I pointed out earlier, neo-Kantianism was driven by the hope to form an integrated world view in the condition of diversified modernity. This hope underlay the aspiration of the early generations of neo-Kantians: to remove incoherencies from Kant's epistemology. The same search for unity and certainty in the condition of diversity initially triggered the cultural–ethical pursuits of the following generations.

But the peculiarity of Kant's ethics and the neo-Kantian diagnosis of the modern cultural situation presented a new set of problems. First, Kant's practical philosophy was intimately connected with the notion of freedom, which belonged to the “noumenal” world, to the realm of the “thing-in-itself.” To dismiss the “thing-in-itself” in this respect was much more difficult than in the context of Kant's theory of knowledge. Dualism threatened to return.

⁵³ Friedrich Paulsen, “Was uns Kant sein kann?,” *Vierteljahrsschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie*, 5/1 (1881), 1–96.

⁵⁴ For example, Thomas E. Willey, *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought, 1860–1914* (Detroit, 1978), 132.

⁵⁵ For example, Wilhelm Windelband, “Immanuel Kant: Zur Säkulargefeier seiner Philosophie,” in Windelband, *Präludien*, 112–46.

Second, the emphasis on ethics highlighted the problem of the relationship between the field of ethics and the field of knowledge, and consequently an even broader problem of how different fields in Kant's philosophy relate to each other. To find a unified system in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was easy. But was it possible to envision a unified world view encompassing all three *Critiques*? The three spheres outlined in them—knowledge, action, non-reflective judgement—seemed to be independent, each governed by its own set of postulates. And thus, even if earlier neo-Kantians had managed to correct the epistemological dualism of Kant, there remained the problem of the pluralism of forms of experience. Plurality of cultural forms and the question of the possibility of achieving unity out of *this* plurality became, then, the central question of neo-Kantianism.

As I see it, the main difference between the Marburg and south-western schools lies in the way they addressed this problem. The two schools differed on the question to what extent, if at all, is it possible to contemplate unity in the condition of the variety of cultural spheres?

The Marburg scholars' answer tended to be "optimistic." Cohen, for example, could argue as follows: "*Culture is unified [einheitlich]* because it is possible, even necessary, to discover in it a unified law on the basis of a unified methodology. This is the task of systematic philosophy: to make culture unified in what is really its methodological lawfulness."⁵⁶ This is, of course, an extreme statement; the philosophical position of the Marburg scholars was more nuanced, and their relative optimism regarding the possibility of unity was due to the fact that their criteria for it became in the course of time less stringent and involved an open-ended logic which did not require closed totality.⁵⁷

Still, it is not philosophical nuances which concern us here, but the public language of the two intellectual movements. It is significant that Cohen was still writing like this at a time when such language was already unimaginable for south-westerners, who gradually adopted a rather pessimistic discourse on the issue. If in 1881 Windelband was able to suggest that all spheres of experience could be subsumed under the concept of "rule," and if a decade later Rickert could still claim that the concept of "ought" was the governing category, the end of every judgement and therefore of knowledge, then in their later publications these two authors admitted that even if something unifies different cultural spheres, it belongs either to the transcendent realm unknown in principle or is discoverable only in a very distant future.⁵⁸ Windelband and his followers

⁵⁶ Hermann Cohen, *Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1912), 1: 18, original emphasis.

⁵⁷ Cf. Jakob Gordin, *Untersuchungen zur Theorie des unendlichen Urteils* (Berlin, 1929), 94–100, 114, 132–3.

⁵⁸ For the earlier position see Windelband, "Immanuel Kant: Zur Säkularfeier seiner Philosophie"; Heinrich Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis: Ein Beitrag zum Problem*

doubted, therefore, whether modern culture could be integrated into a unified whole. They introduced a degree of cultural "pessimism" into neo-Kantianism.

Thus the Marburg and south-western schools symbolize two diverse approaches to the question of cultural integration within the neo-Kantian discourse. Yet these approaches did not carry equal weight in neo-Kantianism understood as a cultural movement. Current studies of the field pay much attention to the ideas of the Marburg neo-Kantians. Yet, historically speaking, their cultural role was relatively marginal. Hermann Cohen enjoyed the reputation of a great Kant commentator, but his role as a public intellectual was limited mainly to the Jewish audience. Moreover, politically, Cohen and Natorp were adepts of a certain kind of "idealistic" socialism, which put them far to the left of the political mainstream but did not endear them to orthodox Social Democrats who were committed, at least in rhetoric, to Marxist "materialism." The ideas of Marburg scholars may have influenced a number of prominent figures on the left, such as the "revisionist" leader Eduard Bernstein, but this influence was indirect and, in any case, what Marburg scholars were saying on the subject of the unity of culture remained below the mainstream public radar. Ernst Cassirer, a younger Marburg scholar, played a significant role as a public intellectual, but with regard to the notion of the variety of cultural spheres he tended to adopt the pluralistic tone more reminiscent of Rickert than of Cohen.

Now, whereas the Marburg philosophers were known and respected as scholars rather than intellectuals, the story of the south-western school seems to be the exact opposite. In the field of Kant commentary they wrote nothing comparable in scope to Cohen's works (unless one counts Windelband's teacher, Kuno Fischer, who published his commentary on Kant in the 1860s).⁵⁹ But they were much more vocal in their role as public intellectuals, setting the tone in debates on the state of modern culture. As a cultural phenomenon, therefore, neo-Kantianism as a whole began to be associated with the specific position taken by Windelband and his followers. They emphasized above all the idea of the radical plurality of cultural spheres in the modern world, believing that the role of philosophy was to theorize the axiological postulates of these spheres.

What, then, was the role of Kant in this story? We have seen that initially neo-Kantians perceived Kant as the guide to the integration of the modern mind. But now, as the focus of attention moved towards the issue of the pluralism of cultural spheres, south-western neo-Kantians moved away from this ideal. At the

der philosophischen Transcendenz (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1892), 66–7; for the latter one see Wilhelm Windelband, "Kulturphilosophie und transzendentaler Idealismus," *Logos*, 1/2 (1910–11), 186–96; Heinrich Rickert, *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur* (Tübingen, 1924).

⁵⁹ Kuno Fischer, *Geschichte der neuen Philosophie*, vols. 3–4, 2nd edn (Heidelberg, 1869).

same time they were not prepared to break with Kant. They carried him with them as far as they could, presenting him as the source of their pluralism, though admitting that the historical Kant might not have been as radical as they.⁶⁰ Thus the neo-Kantian reading of Kant which began with Kant as a great unifier turned into the perception of Kant as a codifier of plurality. Let us now examine what happened to Simmel's interpretation of Kant in the context of this general change.

SIMMEL'S BREAK WITH KANT

Initially Simmel regarded Kant's practical philosophy as the basis to solve the dilemmas of the modern age. He argued that Kant laid out presuppositions for the truly empirical science of ethics, which could produce an antidote to the prevailing scepticism.⁶¹ In his appraisal of Kant's ethics Simmel did not differ from many other neo-Kantians. Indeed the title of his essay "What Is Kant to Us?" was reminiscent of Paulsen's essay from 1881.⁶² Paulsen would be a bit suspicious of the term "empirical." Many neo-Kantians believed that "empiricism" was just a euphemism evoked to conceal the overall nihilism. Yet they would have hardly disagreed with the main message of Simmel's essay, according to which Kant was the founding father of the kind of morality that was able to rebuff modern scepticism.

Simmel's initial view of Kant's ethics paralleled his view of Kant's epistemology: just as Kant's epistemology established the principles of our knowledge, his ethics established the principles of moral judgement and conduct. In both cases the solution is achieved by creating a great synthesis from two contradictory tendencies. In respect of epistemology, the two tendencies were rationalism and sensualism. Analogously, "Kant's moral teaching is a remarkable attempt to decide between social and individualistic tendencies."⁶³ The synthesis between the two is achieved by means of the categorical imperative that requires us to act in such a way that would enable our actions to become a universal law. And "here is the point where the Kantian formula links the complete individualization of conduct with its complete socialization."⁶⁴ On the one hand, an action must be completely free; that is, it must come from the depths of one's own personality, from the determination of one's will. On the other hand, this self-determination is supposed to follow the broadest principles of social welfare. Therefore the

⁶⁰ Rickert, *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur*; Wilhelm Windelband, "Nach hundert Jahren," *Kant-Studien*, 9/1 (1904), 5–20.

⁶¹ GSG, 5: 170, 173.

⁶² See Paulsen, "Was uns Kant sein kann?"

⁶³ GSG, 5: 160.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

apparent dualism between the personal and the social is abolished. To be part of social collectivity and at the same time to be a free individual is in fact one and the same thing.

Simmel admits, though, that there appears to be another dualism within Kant's moral teaching: that between the quest for happiness and the requirements of duty. Kant denied any possibility of reconciliation between the two in this world. By depriving us of this, "he set a rift in the world of ideals which runs right through the middle of the human heart."⁶⁵ But even here dualism was not Kant's last word. The possibility of reconciliation was implied in his view of God and immortality, so that dualism could be overcome by the unity of a higher order, at least hypothetically.⁶⁶

Thus, according to Simmel, the task of Kant's moral philosophy was analogous to that of his theory of knowledge: to show the way to overcome modern dualism and reach coherent unity. An integrated world view is achieved within both the sphere of action and the sphere of thought. But what about their relation to each other? Does the perfect unity characterizing each of these spheres separately also exist when they are considered together? And if they are part of the same unity, do they both enjoy equal status, or does one of them have primacy over the other (for example, does practical reason have primacy over theoretical reason, as many neo-Kantians claimed)?

Simmel occasionally touched on this question in his early writings. Sometimes he appeared to think that the two spheres were fully independent of each other. For example, in the *Introduction to the Science of Morality* (1892), where he advocated the autonomous standing of the category of "ought," he argued that

the Kantian assertion that [moral will] is practical reason, and that it is "in the end one and the same reason" which operates in understanding and in practice, was the expression and is still the cause of countless obscurities and errors. I cannot see at all what the act of will to renounce my advantage for the sake of that of another person or of a collectivity has in common with the ability to draw a conclusion from certain premises, unless one extends the notion of the reason common to them to that of consciousness or of the soul in general, by which, though, this connection loses any specific sense.⁶⁷

On other occasions, like in the aforementioned essay on knowledge and the theory of selection, he suggested that there is a sort of connection between the two spheres, and that the primacy belongs to practice: truth appears to be a function of practical usefulness.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid., 172.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 174–7.

⁶⁷ GSG, 3: 104.

⁶⁸ Simmel, "Ueber eine Beziehung der Selectionstheorie zur Erkenntnistheorie."

Yet generally the question of the relationship between the sphere of knowledge and the sphere of action in Kant's philosophy did not bother Simmel too much in his early writings. He seemed to be satisfied enough with the manner in which the paths to unity *within* the realm of scientific knowledge and *within* that of moral conduct were outlined, and this was everything he needed at that time. His own philosophical position was that the two spheres were irrelevant to each other, and therefore he did not envisage a grand system encompassing the two.

It is with regard to this issue that Simmel's attitude underwent an important change as he later developed an interpretation which put him at odds with the neo-Kantian one. He did this in *Kant*, arguing there that Kant's thought *as a whole* is characterized by a unified disposition; that the inner unity found within each sphere of Kant's thought also exists between the spheres; and that in this unified world view the theoretical attitude appears to be primary and all the rest derivative.

This interpretation is of the utmost importance to Simmel, as he outlines it in many places in the book. Already in the beginning he criticizes the tendency, as it were, to regard "will" rather than "thought" as the central interest of the Kantian system. This view is erroneous, because "Kant and his system are fully intellectualistic; his interest . . . is to prove that the norms valid for *thinking* are valid in *all* spheres of life."⁶⁹ In another chapter Simmel claims that "the modern tendency to adjust or subordinate knowledge itself to other ruling powers of life is completely foreign to Kant."⁷⁰ The famous primacy of practical reason means little. And if one still has any doubts, Simmel decides to be utterly provocative:

The Kantian "primacy of practical reason" over the theoretical—the legitimization of the theoretically unprovable ideas of God, freedom and immortality through ethical needs—has been often exaggerated in respect of its significance for the image of life. Yet it means nothing more than that science, not itself knowing what to do with a couple of concepts, leaves them to the practical need to give them shape, thus making sure that this practical need never interferes in its own affairs. To call this a primacy of practical reason was not a very happy expression.⁷¹

The primacy of practical reason is thus reduced by Simmel to "a couple" of concepts relegated to practice, as if they were a cookie given by parents to an obnoxious child to shut him up.

The primacy of intellect over will in Kant is demonstrated through the analysis of his justification of the categorical imperative. Simmel posits the question why, according to Kant, is it inherently impossible to wish that certain actions be a

⁶⁹ Simmel, *Kant*, 15, original emphasis.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 171–2.

universal norm? Why is it impossible to wish that stealing or lying become a general law of conduct? Simmel claims that two divergent answers can be found in Kant, even if Kant himself did not always clearly differentiate between them. One is based on the notion of one's own interest: when someone hurts others, he cannot really want that others behave similarly towards him. Simmel considers this answer inadequate and incomprehensible, reproaching Kant for "ethical pettiness [*Kleinlichkeit*]." ⁷² Kant must have never been able to imagine a strong rebellious character bent on suppressing others who at the same time would be prepared to submit to someone stronger than he. Similarly, Kant did not seem to realize that the most altruistic natures are precisely those who, while always being ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others, would never want anyone else to behave like them in similar situations.

But there is another answer in Kant which is based not on the considerations of interest but on those of logic. It is inherently impossible to want to universalize certain actions because this would constitute logical contradiction. For example, to turn "lying" into a universal law would entail contradiction. To lie is to make a false utterance. A law is also a type of utterance, and according to the general maxim of "lying" the law prescribing lying would be false too. ⁷³ Such a law would therefore contradict itself.

Unlike in the case of the first argument, Simmel does not spare his praise from the second. He calls it "Kant's most important *purely speculative* thought . . . it is a truly superb idea that the intellectual coherence, the internally logical unity of our actions, constitutes the criterion of their moral value as well." ⁷⁴ Simmel claims that in this argument "the Kantian intellectualism reveals itself as the ultimate authority of moral decisions too." ⁷⁵ This determination of ethics by logic does not abolish Kant's moralism. On the contrary, Kant's intellectualism is the surest foundation of his moralism: "as morality entered next to it as absolute value, a difficult dualism of the ultimate principles [*Dualismus des Definitiven*] would have emerged, which Kant solved by allowing the moral norm to be structured by logic." ⁷⁶

Simmel's interpretation of Kant thus reaches its logical completeness. Kant's philosophical method, according to him, was based on attaining certainty by means of a radical synthesis of two seemingly opposing tendencies. Long before *Kant*, Simmel explained the way this synthesis worked separately within the world of knowledge and the world of action. Now it appears that a similar synthesis

⁷² Ibid., 129.

⁷³ See *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Ibid., 130, original emphasis.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 131.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 132.

happens in Kant's thought as a whole. On an even higher level of abstraction, Kant's "intellectualism" seems to govern both his ethics and his epistemology, regardless of whether both these fields enjoy full autonomy or whether (as seems to be implied in Simmel's argument) Kant's philosophy tends towards the primacy of theoretical reason.

Simmel offers this intellectualist reading of Kant with regard to other fields too, even if only in passing, since he focuses mainly on epistemology and ethics. Thus, in his discussion of Kant's theory of religion, he argues that, because of intellectualism, Kant "could not acknowledge religiosity as a unified structure, as an inclination with its own roots."⁷⁷ Rather (says Simmel in 1913), "religion is to him a sum of theoretical conclusions from morality."⁷⁸ The same intellectualism is found in the field of aesthetics. The mind of the genius, argues Simmel, led Kant towards great insights about art and beauty. Yet these insights coexist with errors which sprang out of Kant's very limited knowledge of true art and his very limited ability for aesthetic feeling. Kant's aesthetic philosophy, even when true, was constructed by him not through a positive relation to aesthetic objects, "but only indirectly, because of the scientifically rational need to delimit with perfect precision the concept of the beautiful versus the sensually agreeable, the true and the morally good."⁷⁹

This intellectualistic interpretation was unusual in Simmel's time. It points to his profound disagreement with the approach of other neo-Kantians, especially the south-western school. Windelband once said (in 1881) that the significance of Kant in the history of philosophy consisted in his overcoming the entire philosophical tradition that had preceded him with its roots in ancient Greece. Greek civilization, in his view, was characterized by "intellectualism," and thus Kant's achievement consisted in overcoming Greek intellectualism.⁸⁰ Later, Windelband retreated somewhat from this formulation. He spoke about "reason" (*Vernunft*) as the basis on which Kant built his vision of all spheres.⁸¹ But he used the word "reason" in an ambiguous and broad sense. It apparently signified for him simply the absence of irrationality, without suggesting any strong "intellectualistic" connotations in the Simmelian sense.

From a certain perspective, Simmel's position can be seen as being close to that of the Marburg school. Marburg scholars envisioned a narrower distance between different parts of Kant's philosophy and put a greater emphasis on the guiding role of logic. But Simmel differs from them in at least two important

⁷⁷ Ibid., 172.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 171.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 210.

⁸⁰ Windelband, "Immanuel Kant: Zur Säkularfeier seiner Philosophie," 118.

⁸¹ Windelband, "Nach hundert Jahren," 9.

respects. First, unlike Cohen, he does not play with the idea of the primacy of practical reason. At most he assigns to each sphere equal standing, placing logic above them all, and on many occasions he sounds as if he puts the sphere of knowledge above those of ethics and aesthetics. He even seems to suggest at one point that Kant's theory of knowledge is the only truly satisfactory part of his teaching.⁸²

Second, and crucially, Kant's coherence and intellectualism were, for Simmel, a reason for reproach rather than praise. Precisely because Kant's world view was intellectualistic, it became inadequate for the day. The unity it entailed was one-sided, not comprehensive. This fully coherent intellectualism was not competent to deal with the true variety of modern experience.

Here we come to the essence of Simmel's change in attitude. The young Simmel believed that Kant's philosophy was a peculiar mixture of coherence and open-endedness. It was coherent enough to serve as a basis for a unified world view and open-ended enough to enable the adjustment of this world view to new conditions. The principles of Kant's world view were, in fact, *the* only satisfactory ones for the purpose of forming unity out of modern variety; this was true both of epistemology and of ethics.

In later years, however, Simmel began to regard Kant's world view as outdated. He still considered Kant's theory of knowledge as fairly adequate.⁸³ But he questioned Kant's ethics, arguing that intellectualism in it went far beyond its proper limits. The sphere of ethics belongs to life, he protested, and the norms of life cannot be reduced to the lifeless formulae of thought. In the 1913 edition of *Kant* Simmel added the following statement:

Modern pragmatism, whatever else one may think about it, has at least seen that the limitations of the critique of reason and of the entire intellectualism lie in this: that knowledge, even if it is the Kantian enthronement of the empirical, cannot protect itself by itself when the question of legitimacy is addressed to experience, and hence it is only within the total structure of life that one should seek the other elements that provide such legitimization.⁸⁴

It was, of course, Simmel himself who almost two decades earlier (in 1895) had brought up the Kantian theory in the context of pragmatism.⁸⁵ As we have seen, in that early article Simmel argued that the truth of experience was dependent on the process of our biological evolution. Yet he did not think that this would make Kant's world view inadequate. On the contrary, he attempted to integrate

⁸² Simmel, *Kant*, 77.

⁸³ Compare *GSG*, 5: 158–9, with Simmel, *Kant*, 42–4.

⁸⁴ Simmel, *Kant*, 50.

⁸⁵ Simmel, "Ueber eine Beziehung der Selectionstheorie zur Erkenntnistheorie."

Kant's philosophy into the general framework of pragmatist philosophy. Later, however, the gap between pragmatism and Kant became clear to him, as Kant was becoming more and more intellectualistic for him, and "life" more and more non-reflective.

This led Simmel to realize that Kant's philosophy could not be modified or improved, and that it should rather be abandoned. He developed a peculiar philosophical standpoint which to a great extent can be identified as neo-Kantian, as it included a distinctively neo-Kantian emphasis on the variety of forms of experience, each governed by its own presuppositions. But this Simmelian "neo-Kantianism" was based on the conscious decision to repudiate Kant, something that other neo-Kantians were not prepared to do, or at least to admit to.

CONCLUSION: "BACK TO GOETHE"

Simmel's final verdict on Kant was that the great German philosopher had not succeeded in finding a satisfactory solution to the problem of "unity in variety." At a crucial junction Kant's unity imposed itself on many-sidedness and even destroyed it.

Kant was indeed a modern thinker because his quest was to develop unity out of a particular kind of modern variety. It is even likely that his solution was adequate for the conditions of early modernity. Yet it turned out to be inadequate for a more advanced stage of modernity. Kant's philosophy was satisfactory in the Age of Enlightenment because the image of man as a whole was then more intellectualistic. But variety itself became more radical, and by transcending the intellectualist picture of man, the modern age calls upon a more radical kind of synthesis.

In the 1918 edition of *Kant* Simmel spoke about this alternative kind of synthesis: "The *whole intellect* knows—this was the Kantian overcoming of rationalism and sensualism. And now this gets higher and broader: the *whole man* knows."⁸⁶ The author of this synthesis, according to Simmel, was Goethe.

Simmel's reference to Goethe was the outcome of a twenty-year intellectual evolution. Already in 1899 he published an essay "Kant and Goethe," in which he presented the two thinkers as offering two different strategies to overcome the disunity of the modern age.⁸⁷ Simmel then began to loosen his philosophical attachment to Kant. Yet at that time, his view of what Goethe's thought could offer to modern culture was still too vague. Somewhat disappointed with Kant, Simmel first looked for an alternative in Nietzsche. It took him a while to realize the centrality of Goethe's alternative for his own concerns, which resulted in

⁸⁶ Simmel, *Kant*, 28, original emphasis.

⁸⁷ *GSG*, 5: 455–78.

the book *Kant and Goethe* (1906), published two years after *Kant*. This was followed by a comprehensive account of Goethe's philosophical outlook in the monograph *Goethe* (1913).⁸⁸ There, Simmel moved even closer to the nascent trend of "life-philosophy," adopting the term *Erlebnis* that had been introduced by Wilhelm Dilthey.⁸⁹ Finally, in 1916 the third edition of *Kant and Goethe* was published.⁹⁰ Though Simmel left most of the text of the first (1906) and second (1907) editions intact, he added a few important paragraphs which reinforced his "life-philosophical" reading of Goethe, outlined in the 1913 monograph.

Simmel's view of Goethe deserves separate treatment. Here I will briefly sketch those points which indicate the kind of philosophical alternative he discovered in the poet. He believed that the move from Kant to Goethe reflected the general cultural situation of his time. Every advanced civilization, he maintained, forms dualisms out of the original unity, and the principal cultural task of such a civilization is to re-establish that unity. Kant offered an intellectualistic, scientific solution to the task, which may have been satisfactory in the 1870s, when the call "Back to Kant!" paved the way to forming a synthesis between speculative idealism on the one hand, and, on the other, the materialism of the 1850s and 1860s that was a reaction to that idealism. But by the end of the century, this scientific solution was broadly recognized as unsatisfactory. There was a need for another grand synthesis which would incorporate aesthetic interests, thus balancing the scientific bias of the Kantian world view. This found its expression in the call "Back to Goethe!"⁹¹

Among the main points of contrast between the two figures were the following. Kant looked for a synthesis outside nature, or beyond it: in the synthetic intellectual activity of "I"; Goethe discovered unity in nature itself. Kant operated by distinctions: his synthesis is enabled by drawing clear limits as to what is appropriate in every domain of experience; Goethe's synthesis is a direct unity which stands opposed to any drawing of limits. Kant's unity is a *post factum*

⁸⁸ GSG, 15: 7–270.

⁸⁹ In Dilthey's view, it is living experience (*Erlebnis*) which should be seen as the integrating moment of culture. Simmel may have also borrowed the aforementioned expression "the whole man" from the *Introduction to Human Sciences*, published several decades earlier (1883), in which Dilthey protested the exaggerated intellectualism of Locke, Hume and Kant, who, he alleged, constructed the knowing subject but forgot to pour blood into his veins. Instead, there is only "the diluted juice of reason as a mere activity of thought." Dilthey argued that true human sciences should be based on "the whole man." Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften: Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte* (Berlin, 1883), xvii.

⁹⁰ *Kant und Goethe*, GSG, 10: 119–66.

⁹¹ GSG, 10: 127.

intellectual solution to the given dualism; Goethe's unity precedes the very division into opposing parts.

Simmel recognized that there might be some similarities between the two thinkers as well, for example in their opposition to naive teleology.⁹² Indeed, some commentators focused on what was common to Kant and Goethe. His one-time student Ernst Cassirer, for example, would later argue, in the context of the notion of teleology, that Goethe and Kant were united not only in what they rejected but to a degree in what they affirmed.⁹³ This was not Simmel's view, however. Kant's and Goethe's grounds for rejecting teleology revealed a profound difference between them, he asserted: Kant's view was on the whole "mechanistic"; Goethe's, "vitalistic."

As Simmel proceeded with his Goethe study, it became increasingly clear that he preferred Goethe's synthesis to that of Kant, finding there intimations of his own life-philosophical ideas. Kant's unity, he believed, was formalistic, as it operated on the level of universals. Goethe's unity was more encompassing, as it transcended the very dichotomy of the universal and the particular. Goethe brought about not unity *in form*, but rather, as Simmel suggested in the third edition of *Kant and Goethe* (1916), the whole existence which is the unity *of form and content*.⁹⁴

Simmel never became a one-dimensional life-philosopher, though. In his last major work, *Lebensanschauung*, two lines are brought together: the dimension of the stream of life, informed by his studies of Goethe and Nietzsche, and the dimension of the plurality of cultural spheres, informed by his neo-Kantianism. Yet, since this neo-Kantianism now found itself in interplay with life-philosophy, it could no longer be Kantian. For Simmel, unlike for his fellow neo-Kantians, the road back to Kant was now fully closed.

⁹² GSG, 5: 143. The paragraphs on teleology were added in the 1916 edition.

⁹³ Ernst Cassirer, "Goethe and the Kantian Philosophy," in *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe: Two Essays by Ernst Cassirer*, ed. J. Gutmann, P. O. Kristeller and J. H. Randall Jr (New York, 1963), 61–98, at 68.

⁹⁴ GSG, 5: 134. Cassirer in his *Freedom and Form* sounds almost identical: Goethe's is unity which precedes the very opposition of the whole and the part, of the universal and the particular (Ernst Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form: Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte*, 2nd edn (Berlin, 1918), 273). But the fundamental dispositions of Simmel and Cassirer are quite different: already in that work Cassirer is less willing to accept some of the claims that enable Simmel to draw a radical contrast between Goethe and Kant, such as the description of the former thinker as a predominantly synthetic mind vis-à-vis the latter as a predominantly analytical one (383).