



Ideal Potentials in Action: Schutzian Affinities in Simmel's View of Life

Simon Lafontaine

Volume 25, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083820ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083820ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Edizioni ETS

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Lafontaine, S. (2021). Ideal Potentials in Action: Schutzian Affinities in Simmel's View of Life. *Simmel Studies*, 25(1), 9–35. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083820ar>

Article abstract

The View of Life is still under-studied despite its status as capstone to Simmel's work. Departing from Simmel's image as an unsystematic flâneur or bricoleur, I assess the affinity of his late theory of life forms with Schutz's analysis of human action in three steps: First, as a common concern with the clarification of foundational problems that coincide with interpretive sociology's basic idea of tracing back all cultural objectifications to the dynamics of living processes. Second, as an articulation of life's self-transcendence concordant with the tension between action as a projected act (*modo futuri exacti*) and as an ongoing process (*modo presenti*) uncovered by Schutz for the first time in his posthumously published book *Life Forms and Meaning Structures*. I follow with a third proposal about how Simmel's line of thought on freedom as a capacity to break through purposiveness and as a rise of ideal constructs might complement Schutz's attention to the growth of the acting self through life events, suggesting that *The View of Life* can be regarded as a precedent to Schutz for linking action projection to the development of aspirations and ideals, and to theorize how the realization of projects supports the development of individual integrity and the ability to appropriate one's life in the midst of unfamiliar and critical situations. Simmel and Schutz are thus shown to contribute to an approach to creative action in sociology.

SIMON LAFONTAINE

Ideal Potentials in Action: Schutzian Affinities in Simmel's View of Life

Abstract. The View of Life is still under-studied despite its status as capstone to Simmel's work. Departing from Simmel's image as an unsystematic flâneur or bricoleur, I assess the affinity of his late theory of life forms with Schutz's analysis of human action in three steps: First, as a common concern with the clarification of foundational problems that coincide with interpretive sociology's basic idea of tracing back all cultural objectivations to the dynamics of living processes. Second, as an articulation of life's self-transcendence concordant with the tension between action as a projected act (*modo futuri exacti*) and as an ongoing process (*modo presentis*) uncovered by Schutz for the first time in his posthumously published book *Life Forms and Meaning Structures*. I follow with a third proposal about how Simmel's line of thought on freedom as a capacity to break through purposiveness and as a rise of ideal constructs might complement Schutz's attention to the growth of the acting self through life events, suggesting that The View of Life can be regarded as a precedent to Schutz for linking action projection to the development of aspirations and ideals, and to theorize how the realization of projects supports the development of individual integrity and the ability to appropriate one's life in the midst of unfamiliar and critical situations. Simmel and Schutz are thus shown to contribute to an approach to creative action in sociology.

In his book *Anonymity: A Study in the Philosophy of Alfred Schutz*, Maurice Natanson reminds us how his mentor Alfred Schutz took most seriously Georg Simmel's insight into the fragmentary character of every individual life: 'All of us are fragments, not only of general man, but also of ourselves. We are outlines not only of the types "man", "good", "bad", and the like but also of the

individuality and uniqueness of ourselves' (Simmel, 1971 [1908]: 10; Natanson, 1986: 127). In his lectures, Schutz referred to this passage from Simmel's excursus 'How is society possible?' to describe how social reality is experienced out of typical action patterns and types of person that we construct to understand each other, and also how the resulting knowledge highlights only certain sectors of our everyday experience while abstracting away the meaning of our actions in their uniqueness. Individuals not only present varying aspects and limits of themselves when taking social roles; they have a partial and imperfect understanding of their own beings. But there is more to social and personal fragmentation than mere incompleteness. Fragments are, in a more fundamental sense, abbreviations of who one could be if he or she would entirely realize his or her life-orientation in its provenance, limits, and prospects, that Simmel (1971 [1908]: 10) understands as the 'ideal potential, the potential which lies in every individual'. Fulfilling one's own ideal potential takes place through *projection* into the possibilities of being disclosed by one's unfolding accomplishments.

Natanson is one of the few who underscore how Schutz's epistemological and methodological project open onto the existential problem of transcendence. 'Transcendence not only is grasped in fragmentary form but fragments the individual. For Schutz, the issue central to human being in the world is that of "coming to terms" with what I have called the fragmented and fragmenting power of transcendence' (Natanson, 1986: 127; see Schutz 1962 [1955]). Besides Natanson's book *Anonymity*, this topic has been neglected by commentators up to the 2000s (see Dreher, 2003; Perreau, 2012; Strassheim, 2016). At the common-sense level, typical generalities are 'taken for granted until further notice', that is, until troubled and unclarified situations emerge, which urges us to question their taken-for-granted character and come up with new ways of approaching and interpreting actions situations (Schutz,

1962b). This process of confronting common-sense assumptions and of appropriating previously given systems of types is uncovered by Natanson (1986: 142–43) as integral to the constitutive side of anonymity, which functions as a “‘transcendental clue’ to sociality’: ‘the force of the transcendental’ enables individuals to trace back what is hidden in their history and the prospects of their becoming in the social world through meaning-establishment and typification. Anonymous types gloss over the singularity of each situation and the otherness that makes everyone unique. Anonymization, on the other hand, opens and closes doors to facets of ourselves and others, bridges multiple realities and confines into one or a few.

Simmel’s line of thinking with respect to the possibilities of human existence is to postulate dynamics of transcendent values and ideals construction immanent to the subjectivity that experiences them from the perspective of everyday life in the modern world. His approach highlights the new vital impulses and life postures arising from the conflict of culture by turning to specific expressions of life’s ‘longing for a new form [and] opposition against the principle of form as such’ in modernist art, philosophical pragmatism, open marriage and prostitution, and in the persistence of mysticism and spiritualism (Simmel, 1971b [1918]: 380). His essays ‘The Crisis of Culture’ (1997 [1917]) and ‘The Conflict of Modern Culture’ (1971b [1918]) show a concern with the tension of life against form arising from disruption of traditional beliefs and routines. With the increasing tendency toward rationalization and control, and the resulting acceleration and systematization of the money economy, consumer culture, and metropolitan life, Simmel (1997 [1917]: 92) states that ‘objective products of culture develop independently in obedience to purely objective norms, and thus both become profoundly estranged from subjective culture and advance far too rapidly for the latter to keep pace with them’. He depicts the widening gap between ‘personal culture’ and the ‘culture of things’ as an incurable ‘pathology’ disrupting subjective creativity and individuality. The autonomous

development of objectivation imposes meanings and creates forms according to its own rules and laws, which, in turn, deceives life's meaningful relationships to forms and leads to formless life.

At the same time, his characterization of these phenomena refers not just to historical changes from past forms of culture to new ones, but also entails a metaphysical or ontological preoccupation with foundational problems concerning life's being. He argues for the development of new principles to address an emerging world-process that places life's restless mobility, renewal and change at the center stage: 'The contemporary historical dissolution of all that is substantial, absolute and eternal in the flux of things, in historical mutability, in a merely psychological reality seems to me to be then only preserved against an unceasing subjectivism and skepticism if one substitutes for every substantial secure value the living interaction of elements which ultimately underlies, in turn, the same dissolution into infinity' (Simmel, 1958: 9, translated in 2004 [1978]: 26). *The View of Life* can be read as a sort of response to his own diagnosis of historical change and social disruption in modernity, as well as a philosophical clarification of his earlier concept of interaction (*Wechselwirkung*).

Modern Life in Fragments

In the first chapter 'The Statement of our Problem: Max Weber's Basic Methodological Concepts' of his early work on the 'Meaningful Constitution of the Social World', Schutz (1967 [1932]: 4) refers to Simmel's key concept of interaction or reciprocal effect (*Wechselwirkung*) both as reflecting a preoccupation with tracing back all cultural forms to the dynamics of living processes, and as a lasting contribution to the development of interpretive sociology in the modern context of increasing heterogeneity and fluidity of traditional institutions. Unlike other approaches of the time, which

assumed a substantial and organic view of society as a natural state to be regulated through scientific laws and models, Simmel describes how social reality is a meaningful context produced by reciprocal effects between objects and subjects. Presented in the first chapter ‘The Problem of Sociology’ of his book *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, the concept of interaction refers to the relational process of affecting others by our actions and being in turn affected by other’s actions rather than a stable substance and a fixed entity containing the fabric of social life (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 23). As they unfold in time and space, interactions materialize the voluntarily but also unconsciously chosen forms of association (*Vergesellschaftung*) by which people take attitudes of conduct in their relation to each other and grow together and apart in pursuing common values and ideals. Yet, in the first chapter ‘Sociology and Phenomenology: The Origin of a Consciousness of the Problem’ of his monograph on ‘the Genesis of Alfred Schutz’s Pragmatic Life-World Theory and its Anthropological Foundation’, Ilsa Srubar (1988: 19–20) states that

[i]nsofar as these recognizable, objectivated formation of the value elements that shape interaction are in the process of dissolving, Simmel’s approach also becomes problematic. The fact that part of the implementation of Simmel’s and Weber’s interpretive approaches experienced its limits in the development of social reality itself, in which the lifeworld conditions of its adequacy were no longer a given does not mean, however, that the theoretical turn that took place there, which enables us to understand society as a meaningful context, could be undone. If social reality had to be assumed to be structured in terms of meaning, and social action had to be irrefutably accepted as something that was intrinsically meaningful, there was in principle no reason to view the everyday, and evidently also social action, as not meaningful. This indicated the direction in which the problem of the meaningfulness (*Sinnhaftigkeit*) of action was to be further

developed: Rather than taking individual types and forms of objectivated meaning as the context in which action is interpreted as meaningful, meaning-establishment (*Sinngabung*) had to be consistently shifted at the level of action itself as an elementary process of its constitution.

Advancing this reorientation in his 1932 monograph leads Schutz to untangle Weber's concept of meaningful action and its status as a basic unit for understanding social phenomena by tracing it back to the fundamental principles of human consciousness. Although he sees limitations in Weber, he still considers his definition of the task of sociology as 'the simple and accurate description of life in society' rather than 'metaphysical speculation' to be his greatest and unparalleled achievement. Focusing on Weber's epistemological and methodological claims and taking seriously the phenomenological method of Husserl lead Schutz to characterize Simmel's contribution as 'confused and unsystematic' (Schutz, 1967 [1932]: 4-5) and to leave aside his engagements with foundational problems in *The View of Life*. Simmel is portrayed as often departing from the precepts of his formal sociology and as offering conceptualization that are closer to concrete rather than pure description. This does not mean, however, that Schutz rejects Simmel's results but that he questions his choice of method and its application. For example, he re-reads Simmel's (2009: 342–45) 'excellent analysis' of epistolary correspondence in contrast with speech found in the excursus on 'Written Communication' within the chapter 'The Secret and the Secret Society' of *Sociology* as an ideal-typical case of the 'various intermediate stages' by which one 'passes through' when transforming an anonymous relationship with a contemporary ('They-relationships') to a more or less intimate face-to-face relationships ('We-relationships') and *vice versa*, such as when soldier in the combat line find letters from home lacking any understanding of their situation (Schutz, 1964a [1945]:

112, 1967 [1932]: 204). This constructive appreciation points to Schutz's and Simmel's mutual concern with the 'secret of the other' and, more generally, to their 'inner affinity', a topic also undertaken by Schutz's friend and colleague at the New School for Social Research, Albert Salomon, in his seminar on 'Simmel and Schutz as sociologists' (Jaworski, 2021).

In those pages where he settles for Weber's approach after having briefly considered Simmel's, Schutz refers to Karl Jaspers who, in his book *Man in the Modern Age*, maintains that modern sciences' claim to objective knowledge of being *in toto* risks veiling the 'transcendence' of human existence with intellectual constructions and ideologies (Jaspers, 1957 [1931]: 157–78). He regards transcendence as a condition of freedom to become but what being is not yet. While Schutz seems to suggest that Weber's approach has the potential to overcome these limitations, one might be tempted to examine more closely Simmel's life-philosophy both as a foundation of his formal sociology and a counterpart to Schutz's take on the existential problem of transcendence.

Simmel's notion of form is complex and integrates to varying degrees the neo-Kantian, vitalist and phenomenological traditions of his time. As Srubar (1988: 17) remarks, his doctrine of the form and content of social action goes back to Heinrich Rickert's concept of value-relationship, whereby social reality in which action takes place receives its meaning and become understandable by virtue of its relation to transcendent objective values and its distance from subjective acts of valuation. It has also been shown, however, that Simmel develops a methodological and epistemological pluralism that he does not carry on systematically, but that offers a metatheoretical approach to deal with the plurality of paradigms and orientations in the social sciences and humanities, as well as to question other responses to intellectual plurality (Levine, 1989). Although he maintains that the field of sociological inquiry has to be constituted by 'abstraction' from the complexity of social life, in

order to 'eliminate in the purity of the concept everything that will be realized at all only historically within society but which does not constitute society *as such*' (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 52), the resulting doctrine of the forms of association (*Vergesellschaftung*) and their contents of interaction (*Wechselwirkung*), presented in his 1908 book *Sociology* as the epistemic foundation of the social science discipline, turns out to be unpracticable consistently and inadequate to the emerging sense of modernity that he perceives in the opposition of life against the principle of form.

Simmel's doctrine of form and content posits an artificial and bipolar separation between lasting social institutions and the fluctuations of ever-changing interactions. Yet from 1908, his work is not fully compatible with neo-Kantianism and parallels phenomenological and vitalist currents of thought. Simmel comes to the realization that the concept of interaction by no mean defines the basic phenomena for the realization of the unity of society's institutions. Rather, it involves underlying living dynamics and intrinsic complexities calling for further study. In his 1912 essay 'On Some Contemporary Problems of Philosophy', he comments on his turn to the 'things themselves' and his newly won distance to Kant:

[A]ll speculation or imagination that is oriented directly toward things themselves is constantly inhibited by the epistemological question concerning whether we have both the right and the means to such knowledge. Whatever particular reservations we have about Kant's self-appointed 'police', we nevertheless continue to drag ourselves along with Kantian shackles on our feet. The suggestive effect of Husserl's philosophy, on the one hand, and Bergson's, on the other, largely comes from their freedom from these Kantian preconditions. These conditions create for us a paralyzing situation in which we are compelled to acknowledge their logical justification, and yet they entail a secret contradiction in which any attempt to develop them

beyond their narrow limits becomes sterile (Simmel, 2019 [1912]: 115).

With regard to the influence of Husserlian phenomenology, unlike the earlier approach to history in *The Problems of the Philosophy of History* (Simmel, 1977 [1892]), several late essays ground historical understanding on the expressive and interpretive processes and relations by which individuals understand one another in everyday life (Simmel, 1980 [1916, 1917-18, 1918]). Historical knowledge for Simmel is neither a mere reproduction of how things really are, nor a concept created by the historian to assemble and synthesize changing life situations into knowable historical sequences. Before life can be represented, it already involves an understanding of itself, ‘an irreducible, primitive phenomenon in which a universal relationship between man and the world is expressed’ (Simmel, 1980 [1918]: 124). In that respect, Simmel’s conception of the process of historical understanding bears affinities with what Husserl (1969 [1929]) and Schutz (1967 [1932], 1962a [1939], 1962b [1945]) after him call the intentional explication of genetic constitution. The historian’s ‘[c]onstitutive acts do not construct *reality* based upon a formal *apriori* structure of transcendental subjectivity, but rather make manifest a material *apriori* [of genetic meaning constitution] that is based on the fundamental subject/object relational structure of intentionality’ (Backhaus, 2003: 225–27).

Life-philosophy provides Simmel with a conception of life as the fundamental principle. This follows Kant’s conception of philosophy as an inquiry into apriorities, while departing from his formalistic approach to the life-process. In the wake of Bergson, life-philosophy is ‘the fundamental physical-metaphysical event of the world-process in general’ (Simmel, 2019 [1912]: 116). Before grasping ‘existence as the summation and interweaving of contents [...] through views and concepts, wished-for ends and sentimental tones, or the play of chance and necessity [...], we *experience and live*

through all this' (Simmel, 2019 [1912]: 115). Although Schopenhauer is the first to conceive of the intrinsic meaning and value of life as constitutive of a modern, post-Christian worldview, his principle of 'will to life', as Simmel (2010 [1918]: 13) interprets it, places emphasis on 'boundless continuity'. And while Nietzsche took the other way around, underscoring how life asserts itself as individuality of forms through the 'will to power', it is in Bergson's philosophy of duration that Simmel finds an approach to the genesis of forms in which life is both the carrier and the basic constituent of existence, 'becoming more and more life all the way to human consciousness', and, when becoming the other way around, into 'mechanism and matter' (Simmel, 2019 [1912]: 116–17).

However, Bergson's dualistic opposition between life and thought supports a conception of form-giving processes and principles of stability as extra-vital, while emphasizing life as flow. As Donald Levine and Daniel Silver (2010, xxvi) state in their introduction to the English translation of *The View of Life*, 'for Simmel, Bergson's understanding of life remained insufficiently dialectical. Bergson's Life does contain its own purpose—more life, reproduction, expansion, increased capacities. Bergson views form as inherently extravital, the enemy and contrary of life. Not incidentally, Bergson does not thematize death or tragedy as internal to life'. Simmel (2010 [1918]: 13) thus recasts Bergson's conception of duration, which emphasizes the ever-flowing quality of experienced temporality, into a more dialectical view of life as the 'building up and breaking through of life's bounds, of its *alter*'. He argues that life reveals itself as an ongoing process of 'self-transcendence', of 'reaching beyond any given [personal and cultural] form and indeed beyond itself' (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 15). Life grows by drawing something new into its flow, transforming it into its own life while breaking away from preexisting life forms.

This ongoing process creates ‘more life’ (*Mebr-Leben*) by crossing borders and building new forms. These forms are ‘more-than-life’ (*Mebr-als-Leben*), and thereby set the condition for life to move toward its own aspirations and ideals.

The Transcendence of Life

Life’s self-transcending process is, for Simmel, fundamentally dual: growing into new forms and setting new boundaries arise from tension and conflict with preexisting forms. These findings are all but disconnected from the crisis situation of modernity. They aim to provide the philosophical grounding to understand everyday experience in the context of a dissolution of historical necessity and institutional solidity into contingencies, dispersive openness, and restless mobilities and flows (see Lash, 2005; Pyyhtinen, 2010; Fitz, 2016). Schutz is also aware of this crisis situation. In the introduction of his unpublished book *Life Forms and Meaning Structures* (*Lebensformen und Sinnstruktur*), written between 1925 and 1927, he appeals to a philosophical foundation of the social sciences that departs from the opposition inherited from Kantian philosophy between mystical metaphysics and methodologically pure science founded on mathematical physics. According to him, the consequences of such conception of science are an ‘ever-growing remoteness from life; no attempt at explaining the most fundamental phenomena of our daily life with the help of these methods: awakeness, sleep; Eros, music, understanding, ‘Thou’ (Schutz, 2013 [1925-1927]: 25). Moreover, Schutz also knew of Simmel’s ‘insights into the transcendence of life’ developed in *The View of Life*, although he mentions them only in passing, when reviewing earlier attempts to tackle ‘the problem of founding’ by bridging the opposition of life and thought (Schutz, 2013 [1925-1927]: 25). And while he settles for a critical appropriation of Bergson’s project, the fact that, in his 1932 monograph on Weber, he abandons most of his early investigation suggests that navigating

Bergson's conception of the living flow as *durée* proves to be unpracticable.

From 1932, the core of Schutz's investigation becomes clearly Husserlian. He bolsters Bergson's conception of *durée* with Husserl's phenomenology of internal time to account for meaning-constitution. This shift from life-philosophy to phenomenology is justified through Husserl's (1969 [1929]: 146) view of metaphysics as a 'science' grounded in categorial formations and following a 'method' rather than 'obscure thoughts and locutions'. The crux of metaphysics is thus to take up investigations across the particular scientific provinces, especially when their evidences strike us as incomplete views of experience as a whole. Bergson's cosmic vision of duration, on the other hand, is rejected for building on a 'meta-subjective construct': '[a]s Bergson knew and Schutz reaffirmed, pure duration is beyond experience. It lacks that 'primordial evidence' which Husserl stressed as the immediate access to the phenomena of consciousness. In this sense, Bergson, in contrast to Husserl, did not start at "the beginning" (Wagner, 1977: 197).

Unlike Bergson who embraces a cosmic view of life, Schutz is more interested in ordinary social life and the lived experience of time and space through which meaning is constructed in individual consciousness and objectivated as social reality through reciprocal gearings and communicative actions. From that perspective, he is closer to Simmel's view of life's self-transcending process. According to Thomas Kemple (2018: 111–12), while

Simmel and Bergson share a concept of *form as creation* rather than as containment and an idea of *change as an interactive process* rather than as an undifferentiated flow, [...] [t]he crux of the matter for Simmel is not whether life becomes social but, rather, how dynamic fluxes and flows are taken up and transformed through structured processes and forms of association

(*Vergesellschaftung*). [...] Rejecting Bergson's cosmic vision of life in which living beings seem to maintain and regenerate themselves endlessly, Simmel ultimately embraces a tragic view of social and individual life-forms as they develop, decay, and die from their own internal forces.

Schutz does not see the duality between life and forms as a tragedy in the Nietzschean sense. But there are also different ways to understand life's tragic implications in Simmel. Focusing on modernity's rationalization process underscores the crisis facing life's meaningful relationship to forms and indicates a turning point toward a deeper view of life – the Greek word *krisis* precisely means a power of separating, of distinguishing, of deciding. The avenue of the crisis leads to Simmel's life metaphysics, in which the grounding of cultural forms in living processes is not merely assumed, but is wakefully appropriated to transform the projects guiding the pursuit of scientific and philosophical culture with the purpose of grasping the complexity of existence in the modern world. 'Without these and other arguments about how forms can be part of subjective experience, then the sociological project could descend into empty formalism. [...] [S]ocial life is after all a form of life' (Silver and Brocic, 2019: 121–22). Tragedy is then intrinsic to the life-process and operates as a kind of threshold between life and forms, growth and loss, birth and death. Unlike Bergson's mono-dimensional conception of *durée* as the eternal flow of consciousness,

the common characteristic of natural, psychic, and societal life is seen in the opposition between processes that construct and dismantle life forms. Cells, organisms, psychic processes, cultural contents, and social structures rise and flourish by giving themselves individual forms (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 82–85). Yet, there is a specific threshold where cells split, organisms reproduce themselves or die and psychic processes, cultural contents and social structures decline, or lose influence on reality, and are substituted by new ones (Fitzi, 2020: 141).

Simmel's concern with the dual character of life and forms can be thought of as a precedent of Schutz, showing how forms function as vehicles for life's self-transcending movement and creation of new forms. Rather than taking up the conventional understanding of Simmel's theory in terms of the 'reciprocal effects' (*Wechselwirkungen*) between individuals and the realized 'forms of socialization' (*Vergesellschaftungsformen*), this incites us to look at the "thresholds" of existence through which non-human being surpass human culture and the point where life extends into more-life or even more-than-life' (Kemple, 2020: 196; see also Pyyhtinen, 2018: 102–24). Schutz's focus on the points of intersection and the passageways between different life forms suggests considering both how forms orient life's flow in various directions and how the formative power of consciousness transcending itself creates new meaning-structures and cultural systems that intrinsically support the development of individual integrity and the capacity to appropriate one's life amid unfamiliar and problematic situations in the modern world. Rather than setting duration against thought and conceiving of form as an extra-vital product as a 'first-degree Bergsonism' would suggest, forms can be considered a kind of embedding principle through which we find our bearings and gain self-knowledge within the space and time of our actions (Worms, 1993; Macherey, 2017).

In his book *Life Forms and Meaning Structures*, Schutz highlights the importance of Bergson's basic distinction between experience as lived through and reflection about experience. The distinction is posited to show how life forms emerge from the stream of individual consciousness through multilayered strata. While Bergson identifies only two planes, duration and thought, which in place of the Kantian antithesis of sensuality and cognition seems to introduce a dualism of the vital and extra-vital, Schutz adopts a methodological pluralism and advances a 'constructive principle' to

conceive genetically of various interrelated individual life forms, namely ‘pure duration’, ‘memory-endowed duration’, ‘the acting I’, ‘the I in the Thou relation’, ‘the speaking I’, and the ‘interpreting I’ (Schutz, 2013 [1925-1927]: 20, 28-31). He believes his theory can be developed by establishing the process of symbolization through which each lower-level life form is articulated by the meaning structure of a higher-level life form. Meaning structures are products of reflective selection and interpretation of experiences that give form to the flow of life by highlighting certain aspects, phases and limits. This process takes place through symbolization, which has the power to convey something of ongoing experience and rendering it discrete, while simultaneously ignoring and concealing other possibilities.

One of the ‘requirements of a vitalist philosophy’ neglected by Bergson that Schutz (2013a [1925-1927]: 20–28) introduces in his analyses and that echoes Simmel, concerns the ‘origin and growth of these symbol systems in their relevance for the planes of consciousness’. A striking feature of symbols is their pervasiveness in the life of consciousness. As Schutz (2013 [1925-1927]: 33) remarks, ‘[s]ymbolization begins already with “being conscious” of the past (continuity) of our duration; thus, with memory’. Unlike Bergson, he suggests that even when aiming at grasping the phenomenon of pure duration, we are in fact referring to memory-endowed duration, not pure duration itself, which is inaccessible to intuition. The Bergsonian conception of duration as a formless, symbol-free and non-conscious eternal flow of heterogeneous contents blending together and always becoming something new is, in fact, an image that presupposes the cohesion, manifoldness and continuity introduced by the conservation of past experiences in memory. In the most general sense, a symbol is a ‘tension’ between what has already flowed by and what is in the very course of becoming (Schutz, 2013 [1925-1927]: 33). This tension stems from the fact that, to channel accessibility to certain contents of experience that would otherwise remain glossed over in duration,

symbols must simultaneously conceal the fullness of context in which they take place.

The tensed structure of symbols is quite salient in the case of human action due to its reflexive forward-looking activity and its creative dimension. To be sure, every experience, whether it be perceiving, remembering, imagining, or judging, is future-directed. In the case of action, however, the future is realized through a practical directedness to aims that it actively seeks to create (Husserl, 1969 [1929]: 167; Schutz, 1967 [1932]: 58). These aims need to be created in consciousness, even if vaguely, by projecting the action in imagination as it will have been already realized at a future time. The action thus presupposes a project to be brought about, through which actors commit to their own possibilities of being and are always more than what they had accomplished before. What an action represents will differ if considered in the course of its becoming or as a future state-of-affairs to be materialized. Schutz distinguishes the result of a finished action at its end point from action as it takes place, considered as an experience in progress, oriented toward the past, present and future of its unfolding accomplishment: '[T]he terms "action" [...] can, first of all, mean the already constituted act (*Handlung*) considered as a completed unit, a finished product, an Objectivity. But second, it can mean the action in the very course of being constituted, and, as such, a flow, an ongoing sequence of events, a process of bringing something forth, an accomplishing' (Schutz, 1967 [1932]: 39). These distinction between the past, present and future of an action also prevails in the present tense (*modo presenti*), the past perfect tense (*modo praeterito*) and the future tense (*modo futuri exacti*) of language. They remain unavoidable modalities of living consciousness at the grammatical and semiotic level (see Strassheim, 2017).

The distinction between the finished act (*Handlung*) and the ongoing action (*Handeln*) goes back to Bergson's contrast between

duration and thought taken up by Schutz as a principle to describe how action is constructed in consciousness. According to Bergson, our thinking processes involve a spatial schema by which we systematize the course of action as a sequence of fixed states leading to clear result, however mobile and discontinuous the ongoing action might have been. We omit the sudden variations and differences of meaning involved in favor of control over means and ends:

In our actions, which are systematized movements, what we fix our mind on is the end or meaning of the movement, its design as a whole in a word, the immobile plan of its execution. That which really moves in action interests us only so far as the whole can be advanced, retarded, or stopped by any incident that may happen on the way. From mobility itself our intellect turns aside, because it has nothing to gain in dealing with it (Bergson, 1944 [1907]: 170–71).

While the project establishes the primary meaning of an action by imagining the result to be produced, namely the act as it will have been materialized at the end point, meaning is not fixed once and for all but varies and changes through the course of action as it unfolds through our ‘growing older’, as Schutz puts it. In Bergson’s terms, he describes how the acting I places the movement of its duration twofold into space and time, both as the ‘flow [...] [of] that which moves’ and the ‘path followed’, the ‘traversed space’ with its invaluable symbols of orientation between places and people (Schutz, 2013 [1925-1927]: 47). As a product of the action that already took place, the path followed can be expected to be reproduced, although its future form is fragmentary and thus merely points to a general orientation in the life-process. Erwin Straus (1980 [1966]: 55) argues in the paper ‘Lived Movement’ of his book *Phenomenological Psychology* that the difficulty to conceptualize the past, present and future is resolved once we consider the basic

phenomenon of change, of becoming in human existence: 'Because we are never *entirely* in any particular time and place, we are in need of complementation. In this way, we are able to transform ourselves, pass from one moment to another or from one place to another, in the continuity of Becoming'. Thus our experiences always exceed the framing and advance picturing of events according to aims.

The *presentifying* feature of action becomes clearer if we consider more closely what actually takes place in action. In his essay 'Choosing among projects of action', Schutz highlights that action gets its momentum from a prior phase of internal deliberation in which we project in imagination several alternative possibilities and decide for one of them. While internal deliberation unifies a field of possibilities in which the action will be carried out, the decision marks its beginning. As actors choose an option to be realized, they transcend a preliminary phase of hesitation in which they create successively a few alternatives one after the other and then maybe re-create the first one to evaluate how it stands now that there is a few reactivable options backing their decision. Schutz (1962a [1951]: 86) challenges the view of associationistic psychology, which assumes that possibilities of action stand next to each other as things present at hand cut off from the temporal flow of life: 'In reality there are neither two tendencies, nor two directions but just an ego which lives and develops by its very hesitations until the free action detaches itself from it like too ripe a fruit'.

The unfolding of hesitation and action does not necessarily follow a linear path, since each phase may entwine with the other in unforeseen ways. Our perception of situations while acting may prompt new projections and the transformation of conventional courses of action by imagination (Knoblauch, 2014). These moments of hesitation, in which new alternatives are produced and undone in consciousness, are not necessarily negative for action.

Hesitations, disorientations, and detours may also make us consider our course of action from another angle, and redraw the boundaries of the few selected alternatives involved in our choices of action. These thoughts may be carried further by considering how the conventional recipes, systematized life projects, and so-called serious commitments that structure normal time's flow may be twisted in ways that are not necessarily experienced as impingement upon action. Cultural theorist Elisabeth Freeman (2010: xxii) incites us to pay attention to 'queer temporalities', in which straight temporalities are interrupted, delayed and curved by unexpected events, coincidental encounters, and improbable relationships. What Schutz saw as the time-structure of action projection, namely the 'Future Perfect Tense' of what will have been accomplished (*modo futuri exacti*), is disrupted by the 'Present Tense' of what is being done through action (*modo presenti*), which is always already engaged with the projective through which we attempt to picture our disorientations and deviations, retreats and errancies, and maintain a direction to our action around objects and across situations in spite of the sheer indeterminacy and openness of the future.

Here a specific *threshold* manifests itself in action, insofar as events are not yet filling in or disappointing action projections. The ongoing action involves a future that is still undefined and that remains an open course of becoming. A basic feature of the self-transcending life-process, according to Simmel (2010 [1918]: 8), consists of the 'continual reaching out by life into what is not its actuality, but such that this reaching out *nevertheless* shapes its actuality'. Alternatively stated, life unfolds its 'potentiality insofar as it is always *not yet*, always in the making, and virtual insofar as it creates its own lines of actualization' (Pyhtinen, 2012: 84). In this sense, actions are *presentifying*: in actively seeking to bring forth something into the world, they move beyond what results, including the chosen projects through which actors are thrown into their own possibilities of being. This incites a distinction between human

action and purposive movement. As Straus (1980 [1966]: 197–98) states in the paper ‘Human Action: Response or Project’ of his book *Phenomenological Psychology*: ‘Purposive movements are directed toward a goal. A change is anticipated and realized through movements subserving a plan. In action, we reach beyond a given situation into the realm of possibilities; within a temporal horizon, open to the future, we busy ourselves producing a new situation. We do not simply react to things as they are, but we act on them’.

Human action is thus characterized by a practical directedness of a different sort than adjustment of the bodily organism to the environment. This distinction is invoked explicitly in the second chapter ‘The Turn Toward Ideas’ of *The View of Life*, where Simmel suggests that the purposiveness of human existence involves a twofold structure: teleological sequences of means and ends provide clarity over the course of action while opening up worlds of experience (e.g. art, science, religion, sport, travel) through aspirations and ideals beyond the organism’s bodily automatism and practical behavior. Purposiveness is concurrently the grounding of life constructs and a transition to ideality by which they become meaningful:

[T]he teleologically emergent element not only appears as separate from all purpose, but in doing so it very frequently disturbs and injures our purposive processes. This can only have a meaning, though, for creatures that can place themselves beyond life. All constructs of specifically human existence – and this will be our concern here – certainly appear to have passed through the stage of purposiveness before ascending into the stage of pure being-for-themselves; that is, freedom (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 29).

Simmel thus overcomes the pragmatist reduction of meanings and values to the goals and results of practical behavior, by showing

how ideal constructs emerge through our practical relation to the world, yet inevitably transcend it into more-than-life. For instance, in seeing beyond the daily demands of practicality and opening up unexplored aspects of perception and imagination, the artwork ‘produced within and for the goals of real life, produces an ideal world where it no longer adapts to the vital order, but instead itself determines or discerns an order to which life (as actuality, as representation, as image) must adapt’ (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 42). Simmel describes this break through purposiveness and the rise of ideal constructs as freedom not in the negative sense of an absence of external constraints, but rather as the turning to one’s intrinsic lawfulness or ideal potential.

Death and Old Age

Since this subjectively lived principle is created and transformed through life’s accomplishments, it is not set along a linear path, but follows long detours and indirects routes, by way of the gaps and discontinuities in our perceptions of things and the intentions of others. Simmel’s metaphysical reflections on death complement these insights, to the extent that they push further his sociological ideas on the tension between life and forms to advance death as a formative moment rather than the standard view of an endpoint: ‘In every single moment of life we are beings that will die, and each moment would be otherwise if this were not our innate condition, somehow operative within it. Just as we are not already fully present in the instant of our birth, but rather something of us is continually being born, so too we do not die only in our last instant’ (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 64–65). Death is thus not a sudden event that actualizes in an isolated moment, but is rather inherent in meaning accomplishments that defines the boundaries of human existence.

This classical view of death complement Schutz’s preoccupation with the actor’s growth through life events. In the plan of his 1936 essay ‘The Problem of Personality in the Social World’, he

introduces the topic of 'the transcendence of life' as a time problem linked to 'being toward death' and 'growing older', with its objective correlates in public time, such as 'childhood, youth, growing up, old age' (Schutz, 2013b [1936]: 219). Alongside the symbols by which we convey what we intend to accomplish, depict past episodes, and sometimes attempt to frame the life stage in which we find ourselves, our lives are continuously enriched with new experiences as we go through various life situations and grow more accomplished: '[A]s the action takes place and proceeds to its termination, the actor's experience is enlarged – "grows older". What was inside the illuminated circle of consciousness during the moment of projection now falls back into the darkness and is replaced by later lived experiences which had been merely expected or protended' (Schutz, 1967 [1932]: 65).

In comparing Simmel's late work with Schutz's analysis of human action, this article has attempted to sketch an approach to creative action in sociology. Life's self-transcending process, interpreted through Schutz's theory of action, and especially his recasting of Bergson's vitalist philosophy, can be developed to include the emergence of aspiration and ideals in projection and action, through which life asserts its own orientation and reaches beyond itself in bringing forth new situations. Yet Simmel's view on death and Schutz's notion of 'growing older' complement themselves in showing how the tendency of ideal constructions toward systematization into a binding time and a confining space can be disturbed and overcome from within life's self-transcending process. As it takes place, action involves emerging possibilities of being that are always a bit skewed and queered by our fragmentary projections and ambivalent concerns, as well as by the eccentric objects of our imagination and intentions of others. Thus the decision is not final but in the making. Since projection through imagination and fantasy gives us a picture of the decision as already

accomplished (*modo futuri exacti*), it is commonly forgotten that we had already begun acting while making the decision and that it is still unfolding while we gear into the world, do things, concert with others, and project forward in the future. In a sense, growing older doesn't mean becoming more serious and knowledgeable, but living up to the provisional character of decision-making, and even doubting the social categories of old age because there is again more-life and more-than-life, by which we continue to define our existence beyond the latest trends in socially approved commitments and projects.

References

- Backhaus, Gary. 2003. 'Husserlian Affinities in Simmel's Philosophy of History: The 1918 Essay'. *Human Studies* 26 (2): 223–58.
- Bergson, Henri. 1944. *Creative Evolution*. New York: Random House.
- Dreher, Jochen. 2003. 'The Symbol and the Theory of the Life-World: 'The Transcendences of the Life-World and Their Overcoming by Signs and Symbols''. *Human Studies* 26 (2): 141–63.
- Fitzi, Gregor. 2016. 'Modernity as Solid Liquidity: Simmel's Life-Sociology'. In *The Anthem Companion to Georg Simmel*, edited by Thomas Kemple and Olli Pyyhtinen, 59–80. London: Anthem Press.
- . 2020. 'Simmel's 'Late Life Metaphysics''. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Simmel Studies*, by Gregor Fitzi, edited by Gregor Fitzi, 1st ed., 138–51. Gregor Fitzi. Description: 1 Edition. | New York: Routledge, 2020. |: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429297502-9>.

Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Perverse Modernities. Durham: Duke University Press.

Husserl, Edmund. 1969. *Formal and Transcendental Logic*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Jaspers, Karl. 1957. *Man in the Modern Age*. Translated by Eden Paul and Cedar Paul. Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books.

Jaworski, Gary D. 2021. 'Goffman, Schutz, and the "Secret of the Other"'. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Simmel Studies*, edited by Gregor Fitzi, 1st ed., 372–82. Routledge International Handbooks. London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Kempe, Thomas. 2018. *Simmel*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

———. 2020. 'Framing, Painting, Seeing: Simmel's Rembrandt and the Sense of Modernity'. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Simmel Studies*, edited by Gregor Fitzi, 196–209. New York: Routledge.

Knoblauch, Hubert. 2014. 'Projection, Imagination, and Novelty: Towards a Theory of Creative Action Based on Schutz'. In *The Interrelation of Phenomenology, Social Sciences and the Arts*, edited by Michael Barber and Jochen Dreher, 31–49. Dordrecht: Springer.

Lash, Scott. 2005. 'Lebenssoziologie: Georg Simmel in the Information Age'. *Theory, Culture & Society* 22 (3): 1–23.

Levine, Donald N. 1989. 'Simmel as a Resource for Sociological Metatheory'. *Sociological Theory* 7 (2): 161.

Macherey, Pierre. 2017. *S'orienter*. Paris: Editions Kimé.

Natanson, Maurice. 1986. *Anonymity: A Study in the Philosophy of Alfred Schutz*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Perreau, Laurent. 2012. 'Symboles et monde de la vie. La sémiologie phénoménologique d'Alfred Schütz'. *Philosophie* n° 115 (4): 31–44.
- Pyyhtinen, Olli. 2010. *Simmel and 'The Social'*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2012. 'Life, Death and Individuation: Simmel on the Problem of Life Itself'. *Theory Cult. Soc. Theory, Culture and Society* 29 (7–8): 78–100.
- . 2018. *The Simmelian Legacy: A Science of Relations. Traditions in Social Theory*. London: Palgrave, Macmillan Education.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1962a. 'Choosing Among Projects of Action'. In *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality*, edited by Maurice Natanson, 67–96. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- . 1962b. 'Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action'. In *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality*, edited by Maurice Natanson, 3–47. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- . 1962c. 'Phenomenology and the Social Sciences'. In *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality*, edited by Maurice Natanson, 118–39. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- . 1962d. 'Some Leading Concepts of Phenomenology'. In *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality*, edited by Maurice Natanson, 99–117. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- . 1962e. 'Symbol, Reality and Society'. In *Collected Papers I. The Problem of Social Reality*, edited by Maurice Natanson, 287–356. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- . 1964. 'The Homecomer'. In *Collected Papers II. Studies in Social Theory*, edited by Arvid Brodersen, 106–19. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- . 1967. *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

- . 2013a. 'Life Forms and Meaning Structure'. In *Collected Papers VI. Literary Reality and Relationships*, edited by Michael Barber, 10–198. Dordrecht: Springer.
- . 2013b. 'The Problem of Personality in the Social World'. In *Collected Papers VI. Literary Reality and Relationships*, edited by Michael Barber, 199–240. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Silver, Daniel, and Milos Brocic. 2019. 'Three Concepts of Form in Simmel's Sociology'. *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 94 (2): 114–24.
- Simmel, Georg. 1958. 'Anfang Einer Unvollendeten Selbstdarstellung'. In *Buch Des Dankes an Georg Simmel*, edited by K. Gassen and M. Landmann, 9–10. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot.
- . 1971a. 'How Is Society Possible?' In *Georg Simmel: On Individuality and Social Forms*, edited by Donald N. Levine, 6–22. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- . 1971b. 'The Conflict in Modern Culture'. In *On Individuality and Social Forms*, edited by Donald N. Levine, 375–93. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- . 1977. *The Problems of the Philosophy of History: An Epistemological Essay*. New York: Free Press.
- . 1980. *Essays on Interpretation in Social Science*. Translated by Guy Oakes. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press.
- . 1997. 'The Crisis of Culture'. In *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, edited by David Patrick Frisby and Mike Featherstone, 90–100. London: SAGE Publications.
- . 2004. *The Philosophy of Money*. Translated by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby. London; New York: Routledge.

- . 2009. *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. Leiden; Boston: Brill.
- . 2010. *The View of Life: Four Metaphysical Essays with Journal Aphorisms*. Translated by Donald N. Levine and John A. Y. Andrews. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2019. ‘On Some Contemporary Problems of Philosophy’. Translated by Olli Pyyhtinen and Thomas Kempe. *Simmel Studies* 23 (2): 111–19. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075214ar>.
- Srubar, Ilja. 1988. *Kosmion. Die Genese Der Pragmatischen Lebenswelttheorie von Alfred Schütz Und Ihr Anthropologischer Hintergrund*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Strassheim, Jan. 2016. ‘The Problem of ‘Experiencing Transcendence’ in Symbols, Everyday Language and Other Persons’. *Schützian Research* 8: 75–101.
- . 2017. ‘Language and Lifeworld: Schutz and Habermas on Idealization’. *Civitas. Revista de Ciências Sociais* 17 (3): 411.
- Straus, Erwin W. 1980. *Phenomenological Psychology*. New York: Garland Pub.
- Wagner, Helmut R. 1977. ‘The Bergsonian Period of Alfred Schutz’. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 38 (2): 187–99.
- Worms, Frédéric. 1993. ‘Les trois dimensions de la question de l’espace dans l’oeuvre de Bergson’. Edited by Renaud Barbaras. *Revue Époqhè*, no. 4 (L’espace lui-même): 89–116.