

The Moral Significance of Death in Georg Simmel's Metaphysics of Life

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Volume 21, Number 1, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041337ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041337ar>

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Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Staiti, A. (2017). The Moral Significance of Death in Georg Simmel's Metaphysics of Life. *Simmel Studies*, 21 (1), 73-88. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041337ar>

Article abstract

In this paper I discuss the significance of Simmel's conception of death as presented in his capstone work *Lebensanschauung* (1918). I argue for Simmel death is the form of all cultural forms and that it has a transcendental, form-giving function for life in its concrete unfolding. I conclude with a brief examination of the thought of immortality and some suggestions about how Simmel's conception of death has a bearing on current issues such as the increment of life-expectancy in developed countries.

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Introduction: Death as Spam?

In large institutions such as universities it is customary to receive death notices via email whenever an affiliate passes away. Oftentimes, death notices pop up in the middle of a busy day, while we are hurriedly typing some notes for our next class or attending to the daily chore of answering emails that we cannot ignore any longer. In rare moments of piety, we may interrupt our work for a second to open the death notice and devote a fleeting thought or a prayer to the person who died. Most of the time, however, our reaction to death notices is not dissimilar from our reaction to spam: we resume our previous activity immediately after deleting them.

If there is at least a broad sense in which our inbox is a metaphor for our actual life, then there is a sense in which the reception of death notices is a metaphor for one way of looking at our actual death. As a matter of fact, our inbox encapsulates a significant amount of the things that fill and sustain our lives (our next publication, the correspondence with our distant friends and relatives, the updated calendar of our kids' activities, etc.). Death notices irrupt in this more or less cohesive whole of lived concerns and businesses as something fundamentally foreign. They interfere for a millisecond with our activities, in order to fade into oblivion one millisecond later. In a similar way, death can be regarded as an intrusive event that visits life from without, as it were, and merely ends its ongoing flow at one fell swoop. On this account death is fundamentally alien to life in the same way in which death notices are fundamentally alien to our

electronic dealings and doings. Somewhat ironically, our own death would resemble a death notice we can no longer ignore.

The philosopher Georg Simmel (1858-1918) devoted his capstone work *Lebensanschauung* (published shortly before he died in 1918) to the exploration of metaphysical questions about life. The perennial question concerning the meaning of death features prominently in chapter three of the book, *Death and Immortality*, which is largely lifted from an earlier essay titled *Toward a Metaphysics of Death* (Simmel, 1910). In this chapter Simmel endeavors to articulate an alternative to the understanding of death as fundamentally alien to life. If death were just the event that ends life “from without”, then we could argue that death is fundamentally meaningless for life. It has no essential relation to life; it merely befalls life as an accident, albeit it an inevitable one. On the contrary, the *prima facie* obvious question about the meaning of death seems to require a different attitude in order for a *positive* answer to be possible in the first place. What does it mean to ask about the meaning of death? What kind of question is this? In Simmel’s perspective to ask about the meaning of death orients the philosophical inquiry toward determining death’s *positive* relationship to life. Answering the philosophical question about the meaning of death amounts to making sense of death as being fundamentally inherent in life from the outset. It is about telling a metaphysical story in which death is not the nemesis but rather the *shaper* of life. In this paper, I will argue that Simmel’s metaphysical story about death brings to light death’s *moral* significance for life. I take the word moral in the etymological sense of that which pertains to our *mores*. Simmel shows that death has a fundamental form-giving function with respect to all the multifarious occupations and rituals that fill our lives in the overarching whole of culture. While all the cultural forms that define a certain epoch or societal group are contingent and liable to change under life’s pressure, in Simmel’s philosophy death constitutes the form of all forms, i.e., the one form

endowed with intrinsic necessity and that the onflow of life can never possibly burst.

I will begin with some considerations about Simmel's metaphysics of life in *Lebensanschauung*. I will then turn to the phenomenon of death and discuss its meaning for living beings in general. Subsequently, I will examine Simmel's key notion of form and discuss the abovementioned point that death is the form of all cultural forms. In so doing, I will argue that death also has a systematic function in Simmel's philosophy of culture. I will then discuss the constitutive function of death for the very notion of life *as such* as opposed to the multifarious situations and scenarios (Simmel uses the word "contents") in which our actual life unfolds. I will conclude with a brief section on a few ways in which Simmel's understanding of death as the shaper of life could be further spelled out and made relevant to hotly debated topics in our present.

Simmel's Metaphysics of Life

Despite its recent publication in English translation (Simmel, 2011 [1918]), Georg Simmel's most ambitious philosophical work and spiritual testament, *Lebensanschauung* (originally published in 1918, the same year of Simmel's death) remains largely unread. *Lebensanschauung* is remembered (if at all) only for the influence it had on other, more recognized philosophers, such as Martin Heidegger (Krell, 1992: 92-95; Jalbert, 2002) or Vladimir Jankélévitch (1925; 2008). This is hardly surprising, considering the marginalized status of Simmel's work in both disciplines to which he devoted his entire life: philosophy and sociology. Elizabeth Goodstein, the recent author of a monumental study of Simmel aptly registers that he "is remembered today almost exclusively as the 'founding father' of modern sociology" (Goodstein, 2017: 35), despite the fact that he "saw himself as primarily a philosopher, and he was regarded as such by his contemporaries" (Goodstein, 2017: 36).

Goodstein suggests that the difficulties Simmel faced to find a proper position in the German academia is tightly connected to the unstable and transitional disciplinary status of both sociology and philosophy in the early twentieth century, as well as the ambiguous nature and innovative (modernist) style of his writing (Goodstein, 2017: 42). Despite her commendable effort to resituate Simmel in the disciplinary context that he found most congenial, namely, philosophy, it is telling that Goodstein does not devote more than cursory remarks to *Lebensanschauung* (Goodstein, 2017: 339). Tellingly, the most sustained attempt to de-marginalize Simmel, the self-professed but forgotten philosopher, goes along with a marginalization of his most self-professedly philosophical work. By contrast, the centrality of *Lebensanschauung* not only to Simmel's thinking but as the most mature and sophisticated expression of the overall movement of *Lebensphilosophie*¹ did not escape the attention of Heinrich Rickert, lifelong friend and honest critic, who in his *Die Philosophie des Lebens. Darstellung und Kritik der philosophischen Modeströmungen unserer Zeit* (Rickert, 1920) characterized Simmel's last book as "possibly the most clever attempt ever made to defend the concept of life as the ultimate principle of all philosophy" (Rickert, 1920: 68).

How does Simmel understand life and in what sense does he consider it the ultimate principle of all philosophy? Life is a deliberately polysemic term in Simmel. It is meant to capture both the reality of organic existence vis-à-vis inert matter and the reality of conscious existence vis-à-vis timeless validities such as ideals, norms, concepts, meanings and all the un-real entities that populate cultural constructions. In both its organic and its conscious dimension, life is characterized for Simmel as self-transcendence. Life always unfolds within limits and the awareness of such limits already projects it beyond them. The

¹ For an overall characterization of *Lebensphilosophie* see Somerville/Staiti, 2013.

dynamics of life thus consist in a constant self-transcending of limits, which takes place in two directions: more-life (*Mebr-Leben*) and more-than-life (*Mebr-als-Leben*) (Simmel, 2011: 15). Life always transcends itself toward more life, i.e., it exceeds the present moment and flows toward a future that is experienced as a promise of increment and fulfillment. At the same time, life transcends itself also in a “vertical” direction by producing ideas that, once they have emerged from the concrete life-nexus that gave them birth, take on a life of their own and confront life, as it were, from above (Simmel, 2011: 17). In this second dynamic of self-transcendence life experiences itself as standing over against a variety of demands and obligations that range from the theoretical sphere of logical thinking to the concrete norms and traditions of a cultural community. Importantly, life *needs* such demands in order to give itself a form. At the same time, the yearning for more life establishes a necessary tension between the kind of eternal validity displayed by life-forming ideals and the promise of futural existence that exceeds the limits imposed by such ideals. Thus, life is what it is only as a perennial tension between the necessity of a form and the necessity to transcend and transgress any given form. As Simmel puts it: “Life is thus caught up in the contradiction that it can only be lodged in forms and yet cannot be lodged in forms, that it passes beyond and destroys every one it has created” (Simmel, 2011: 15).

In this dynamic life discovers the contingency of all forms and, correlatively, itself as distinct from all forms. This tension establishes a transcendental problem about the relationship between life and form, and raises a question about what exactly makes it possible for life, which is other-than-form, to generate its own other by itself and out of itself. In the next sections I will argue that death as immanent in life constitutes Simmel’s solution to this transcendental problem.

Living Beings as Dying Beings

In the opening section of the third chapter of *Lebensanschauung, Death and Immortality* Simmel introduces a distinction between organic and inorganic beings based on their respective forms. While “the form that defines” inorganic beings “is determined from outside,” the organic body “produces its form from within; it stops growing when its innate formative energies have reached their limits, and these continuously define the particular manner of its extent” (Simmel, 2011: 63). Simmel is thinking of the *boundaries* that delimit the portion of reality in which something exists. For inert material bodies their boundaries coincide with the portion of materially filled space that separates them from other bodies. Simply put, an inorganic body ends just where another inorganic body begins.

By contrast, organic bodies are delimited by a set of boundaries that flow from their very essence. The trajectory of their development follows a pattern that is not merely imposed from without by other organic bodies, but it obeys an inner logic. The extreme boundary delimiting the sphere of existence of an organic being is its death. The notion of a limit or boundary that circumscribes, and thus gives a definite shape to the existence of an organic being thus includes a temporal dimension that seems to be missing in the definition of the boundaries of inorganic beings². Over and above the spatial boundaries set by their

² Simmel could not be aware of the physical phenomenon of particle decay, which was discovered and studied only after his death. In light of this phenomenon it seems that his distinction between inorganic and organic being in terms of the external and the internal definition of boundaries for existence tends to blur. The fact that inorganic elementary particles spontaneously tend to transform into other particles, thereby “dying”, seems to bear witness to the fact that the “form-giving” power of something like death is already at work at the most elementary levels of physical being. It is fascinating to notice, however, that the language used by physicists to describe this phenomenon is that of the life sciences. They talk about the ‘survival’ or the ‘lifetime’ of a particle and its “death”. It seems that rather than

bodies organic beings exist within the temporal boundaries set by their death.

In order to substantiate these claims Simmel makes abundant references to the biology of his time. He indicates the phenomena of aging and cellular breakdown as evidence that death accompanies the development of life from the outset. There is no such thing as a period of life characterized exclusively by assimilation and growth and a subsequent period of life characterized exclusively by decay and the approaching of death.

While the metabolism of life substance consists of assimilation and breakdown, and growth presupposes the preponderance of the former over the latter, we already observe a decidedly decreasing assimilation soon after birth. In other words, although sufficient to produce the appearance of growth, assimilation nevertheless becomes relatively ever more modest even during the growth period, and the cell pigmentation (particularly in the central nervous system) that is identified as a specific change of aging already begins in early youth (Simmel, 2011: 64).

Simmel would likely reject contemporary “wear and tear” theories of aging (according to which aging is due to external damaging factors) and he would look with interest at genetically based theories of aging, according to which the biological dynamics that eventually lead to physical death are built into the very fabric of our organic existence³.

undermining Simmel’s point a consideration of particle physics requires that the model he worked out for organic bodies is extended to the totality of what is all the way down to its microphysical recesses. Perhaps there is a sense in which death is not merely the shaper of life but the shaper of being as such. The pursuit of this line of thought, however, exceeds the scope of this paper.

³ One such theory has been recently developed in detail by Jean-Claude Ameisen (1999). The intellectual proximity to Simmel in Ameisen’s scientific account is remarkable and would deserve a closer discussion, which, however, would exceed the scope of the present paper.

Simmel's references to biology have been criticized for introducing empirical factors in his metaphysical narrative, thus allegedly conflating two dimensions of inquiry that should be best conducted along separate lines. Heidegger, for example, reprimands Simmel's inability to conduct his inquiry in a purely "ontological" register (see Heidegger, 2010 [1927]: 239). Biological truths, for Heidegger, are merely "ontic" and thus filled with ontological presuppositions that a truly radical philosophy cannot simply rely upon. From Simmel's perspective, however, the support of biological evidence is key to his argument. As I will explain in the next section, his understanding of death is embedded in his broader understanding of the relation between form and contents of life. Being able to ground his metaphysics of life in an ultimate biological form (death) that is not as contingent as the forms life takes on in the context of culture is of paramount importance. For the moment, let me conclude this section with a quote that summarizes Simmel's view:

[The biological evidence] makes clear, more than ever, the form-giving meaning of death. It does not bound (i.e., form) our life only in the hour of death, but is a formal moment of it that colors all its contents: the boundedness of the whole of life by death influences each of its contents and instants beforehand; the quality and form of each would be different if it could extend beyond this immanent boundary (Simmel, 2011: 65).

Dying Beings as Formed Beings

The notion of form is perhaps the most crucial in Simmel's philosophy. It can be easily clarified in the sphere of culture; however, a supplementary intellectual effort is necessary in order to grasp the all-encompassing, metaphysical meaning Simmel assigns to it. If we define the life of a human individual broadly as the totality of that individual's bodily and spiritual energies, it is not hard to see that such energies are always necessarily realized in the framework of some social or cultural form. If we

try to imagine the raw psychic material of which our lives consist, then this material is always canalized and shaped into the forms of life that the culture of our time makes available for us. The overwhelming mass of emotions, perceptions, desires, logical inferences and even physical stimuli that make up our selves takes on the distinctive shape we call our individuality in the context of given social and cultural forms: marriage, profession, religious affiliation, etc. It is likely that the life of a medieval knight consisted for the most part of the same 'raw material' that the life of, say, a contemporary academic consists of. A more or less similar mass of emotions, perceptions, physical stimuli, desires, etc. made up the fabric of the medieval knight's psychical life. However, the *form of life* in which that raw life-material existed is no longer available for us. The material of our lives is lodged in different cultural forms that were not available for the medieval knight.

The scheme form/material, however, extends beyond the sphere of culture. We can think, for instance, of perception as a certain spiritual form in which an otherwise chaotic mass of sensory materials is woven together into one meaningful experience. A definite feeling, say, "love" or "hate", is the form in which an otherwise oscillating array of emotional states filling a certain stretch of our life receives a relative stability and significance. Consider, for instance, how superabundant and infinitely diverse is the mass of raw emotional materials compressed into the form "love for our partner". The list could continue but these few examples should suffice to understand the pervasiveness of Simmel's notion of form. For Simmel, the metaphysical essence of life consists precisely in its inevitable flowing into forms of its own making. Life exists in them, eventually bursts them and presses on to create new forms.

In light of these remarks, death should be seen as the most primordial and ultimately inalterable form in which life exists, a "veritable *a priori*" (Jankélévitch 1925, 251):

We hold our plans and actions, duties and interpersonal relations (obviously not by conscious consideration, but instinctively and traditionally) from the outset within bounds proportioned to a death-delimited life. But the way this delimiting or forming of life occurs – both as a whole and in its particulars – is determined by the fact that, tough we are absolutely certain about the “whether” of the end, we are nevertheless absolutely uncertain about its “when” (Simmel, 2011: 66).

The form-giving meaning of death for life as a whole can be approached by analogy thinking about the form-giving meaning of sleep for that subordinate whole of life we call a day. Our plans, duties, actions and interpersonal relations are from the outset proportioned to a sleep-delimited day. We cannot seriously make the resolution to read *War and Peace* in one day because the continuity of our activity will be inevitably interrupted by the urge to sleep. Even when we pull “all-nighters” we are merely stretching the limits imposed on our life by sleep and by no means overcoming them.

The same situation obtains on a larger scale with death. The average course of life of a human being is formed within the temporal boundaries imposed by death. In the above quote Simmel calls our attention on the two factors that characterize the life-shaping power of death: its “whether” and its “when”. Human beings are absolutely certain *that* they will die but they are absolutely uncertain about *when* they will die. Simmel points out that if we knew the exact day of our death (a scenario that ancient mythologies often played with) “life [...] would probably be subject to an unbearable pressure for most people” (Simmel, 2011: 66). Or maybe, as he reports one of his friends to argue, we would feel a tremendous sense of empowerment and we would be able to live in a more purposeful and realistic way than we usually do. In truth, it is virtually unimaginable how a life would look like if our middle ground position about knowledge of death were altered. We could imagine creatures like Tolkien’s

elves or Milton's fallen angels who are uncertain about *both* whether they will die and, consequently, when they will die. The general shape of such creatures' life is very hard, if not impossible to imagine. Tolkien's elves, for instance, seem all too human to be creatures who allegedly know that they will live forever if their life is not taken by violence. Wouldn't they rather be anxious, paranoid creatures who would spend their unending lives obsessing over what could kill them? Or would they at some point grow weary of life and contemplate suicide or a memorable death? It is hard to tell. Similarly, it is impossible to imagine the form of life of creatures who were absolutely immortal. Curiously, however, if we follow Simmel's categorization, the predicament of immortals would turn out to be in a puzzling way identical to that of humans who knew for certain the day of their death. Both immortals and human 'foretellers' would be absolutely certain about both the whether and the when of their death. Whether their respective ways of life would therefore resemble one another or be logical opposites is a question we are intrinsically unable to answer.

Death as the Freer of Life

Simmel attributes one further life-shaping function to death. Death throws life into relief; it liberates life from its otherwise inextricable entanglement with the contents in which it unfolds. Recall the functional distinction of form and content outlined above. We can describe our existence as a form that embraces a plurality of contents, that is, all the situations, ideals and undertakings that we are invested in over the course of our life. On the one hand, while we are living through all these contents there is no ostensible distinction between our life as such and the given content in which it is invested. In this moment, as I am writing this paper, there is a sense in which I *am* this particular situation, I am fully absorbed in it and my life coincides with it. On the other hand, in any given situation we have a vague and

mostly unaware feeling that our life has journeyed into that situation from a previous situation and will soon journey out of it and into a new situation. While we immerse ourselves in a given situation, we nonetheless retain “the sensation of an obscure unfurling excitation of life [*Lebensbewegtheit*],” (Simmel, 2011: 71) or life-motility that is not exhausted by any given content. We have a sense of distinction between our life as such and the situations, values, plans (in one word: contents) in which we invest it. Simmel proposes the following hypothesis to explain this duality of (motile) form and content of life:

Yet this separation [...] seems to me to become possible only because their bearer, their process, is subjected to death. If we lived forever, life would presumably remain indistinguishably fused with its values and contents, and no real impulse at all would exist to imagine these outside of the single form in which we know them and can experience them infinitely often. But in fact we die and thereby experience life as something accidental, something ephemeral, something that, so to speak, can also be otherwise (Simmel, 2011: 71).

Consider, for example, a person who devoted her life to a certain ideal, say, social justice. That ideal is, in Simmel’s words, fused with that person’s life. It is presumably an ideal that emerged out of the very specific and unique features of her personality, in some way repeating at the individual level the distinctive movement of emergence of the ideal of social justice that took place within human history writ large. However, a person who devoted her life to an ideal will have a sense of the contingency of her existence vis-à-vis the timeless validity of the ideal. Even if that ideal is, so to speak, one with her innermost self our imaginary character is able to see that ideal as separate and independent. Simmel’s maintains that here mortality operates the cut, i.e., the distinction between the life-process and its contents, by way of rendering possible to imagine these contents as severed from their life-source. I, the individual, will die but the ideal of social justice will live on.

By way of separating the contents of life from the process of life, death also sets the basis for yet another separation, which in Simmel's metaphysical narrative is at the origin of the notion of immortality: the separation between the contingency of life and our *ego*, which longs for immortality. For Simmel, the ego emerges as a distinct formation out of the dynamic movement of life as an effect of the lack of fulfillment of our desires:

If our wishes were always completely fulfilled, the act of willing would perish with its fulfillment and a new one, with new content, would begin — the inner process would be fully exhausted with its relationship to reality, and the ego would not emerge from its entanglement with the reality that accompanies it step for step. This emergence occurs, though, when the will outlives its contact with reality because reality does not quiet the will [...] (Simmel, 2011: 72).

In the repeated experience of the gap that exists between our infinite desire and the partial fulfillments life has to offer, the ego emancipates itself from the life-process and its contingent contents. It experiences itself as existing over and against the ultimately unfulfilling contingencies that life presents to it:

The thought of immortality enters here. Just as (in the case discussed above) death allows life to founder so as to permit the timelessness of its contents, as it were, to become free, so now, on the other side of the dividing line, death terminates the series of experiences of particular contents without thereby cutting off the ego's demand to perfect itself forever or to exist further — the counterpart of that timelessness. Immortality, in the longing of many profound people, means that the ego could escape from the contingency of individual contents completely (Simmel, 2011: 74).

Thus, death harbors within itself the obscure promise of a “pure” experience of who we really are, i.e., a state in which our ego is finally severed from the contingent situations of life in which it invested and absorbed. On Simmel's account, nothing would be farther from a fulfillment of the longing connected

with the notion of immortality than a mere prolongation of our earthly life in some kind of otherworld. In one sense, the thought of immortality is an inkling into the possibility of a radically new form of self-transcending, a “more-than-life” that does not culminate in yet another timeless ideal but rather in the pure nucleus of our selfhood over and above the endless play of life-contents and forms in which we are constitutively caught up. For good reasons Vladimir Jankélévitch speaks of a “Simmelian eschatology” (Jankélévitch 1925, 254) with reference to these sections of *Death and Immortality*; however, it should be noted that Simmel constantly talks about the *thought* of immortality, thereby marking the transcendental register of his discourse and dispelling any possible realistic interpretation of his analyses. Simmel’s point is not to speculate about what actually happens when we pass away, but rather to spell out the content of a thought that haunts the deepest recesses of the human soul and looms large over vast spheres of human culture.

Conclusion

Simmel’s characterization of death as the shaper of life offers interesting clues for further questions and possible ramifications of his metaphysical narrative. One line of inquiry would pertain to the way in which death’s overall form-giving function for life reaches into specific disciplinary fields. For example, death seems to have a form-giving, transcendental function with respect to the theory and practice of medicine. The concept of death has an a priori function with respect to the definition of the arguably most basic concept of medicine, that is, the concept of illness.

On a similar note, Simmel’s metaphysical narrative seems to be a good basis to approach crucial social phenomena in our time, such as the ever-growing increment of life-expectancy in developed countries. If Simmel is right about us living “death-delimited lives”, then an increasing life-expectancy does not merely amount to a prolongation of life in the forms we already

know. It presumably means the advent of completely new forms of life. As 21st century Westerners we are only marginally better off trying to imagine the life of a person whose life-expectancy is below thirty years than we are imagining the life of immortals or Tolkien's elves. Similarly, we can only have a faint anticipation of the contractions, expansions and transformations in life-goals and ideals characterizing a much longer human life. While permanent, the shaping power of death is not rigid and static. It is as dynamic as life itself.

At the beginning of his essay Simmel states that “proper symbol” of a “mechanistic view” of death “is the skeleton approaching the living being from without” (Simmel, 2011: 64). It is fair to say, then, that the proper symbol of Simmel's own metaphysical view of death is the late medieval iconography of *Danse Macabre*, in which the skeleton dances along with peasants, knights and kings partaking of and perhaps even setting the pace in the unending circle of historical life.

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