

3

Individualization as Ethical Concern

The Stranger and the Courage to Be Different

In the context of designing a novel discipline of scholarship, Simmel points out that sociology finds its justification, in part, from the fact that history is no longer seen as merely the result of individual intentions and decisions of a few greats but as the result of **social movements** that are actions of the masses and classes. This means a shift from the individual to the collective in method. However, his ethical concern points in the opposite direction. He wants to interpret social development as the gradual evolution and refinement of the individual, and as a result, he is optimistic about future social movements being geared toward an increase in personal freedom.

Simmel had great respect for the innate potential of individuals. He hoped that more personal freedom would mean the realization of more positive individual gifts. This optimism had the following foundation: Simmel believed that humans have the ability and the duty to develop their talents. In his writings on religion there is a moving illustration for that notion, when Simmel recounts one of Martin Buber's Hasidic tales: the story of a Rabbi by the name of Meir who speculates with his students what will happen to them when they die and face God upon their arrival in the beyond.

The rabbi first assumes that God may ask him, "Meir, why did you not become Moses?" The answer to that will simply be "Because I am only Meir." This would then reflect humility as well as the rejection of an alien

pattern of personal development. The same would apply to a second hypothetical question by God: “Why did you not become Ben Akiba?” Answer: “Because I am only Meir.” But in the end, the rabbi imagines that God may ask him, “Meir, why did you not become Meir?” This leads to the religious man’s desperate question directed toward his assembled students: “What shall my answer be then?” Because having missed one’s calling by not becoming what one is destined to be would be a frightening admission of failure (Simmel, 1997, p. xiv).

However, developing one’s unique abilities in order to become what one is destined to be—attractive as that may sound—often requires the courage to endure isolation. Peer group pressure usually levels individual abilities down to the group average. Students with exceptional interests, like art or archeology, frequently find no sympathy among classmates. Following one’s calling, then, seems to demand sacrifice in popularity and may even lead to the individual finding himself or herself in the position of an outsider, similar to a stranger. As we shall see, Simmel was fully aware of this problem. He viewed the stranger in the history of culture as a courageous outsider.

One of the most widely read and quoted texts by Simmel is his “Excursus on the Stranger” (Simmel, 1908b, 1908/2009). It contains his reflections on the interplay between society, with its demands for conformity, and the individuals with the strength to be different. Simmel invites us to imagine two social groups, which he gives the meaningless names *M* and *N*. At the outset, they are sharply distinct from one another, in terms of their typical characteristics and their respective attitudes and beliefs.

This is, however, only the point of departure for a dynamic view of what happens to the groups after they contact each other. Each consists of homogeneous (very similar) and closely related members. Next, before the impact of the other group is felt, in Simmel’s model for change the increase in membership of the group gives rise to more and more differentiation within it: The more there are, the more they try to be somehow special in order to achieve recognition.

As a consequence, what were originally minimal differences among individuals, in terms of outward and inner disposition and its expression, become increasingly noticeable due to the necessity of surviving in the face of fiercer competition, with increasingly unconventional means of specialization for emphasizing individual uniqueness. No matter how varied the points of departure of the groups *M* and *N* may have been, the two will gradually resemble each other more and more because only a relatively limited number of essential human “formations” is available, and their number can only increase gradually (Simmel, 1908b, p. 710). (The limited number of available alternatives can be observed, for instance, in the context of reforms

in institutions of higher learning: Frequently after two or three generations of reformers, the “innovation” is back to the same conditions where the predecessors of the current leaders started making changes).

There are numerous reports in the literature of cultural anthropology of the effects of strangeness on social evolution (Bargatzky, 1978). The **stranger** who represents an unknown culture and country is usually welcomed and even protected under strict rules of hospitality. In most cases, the members of the indigenous culture know, or at least sense, their chance to learn something new from their visitor. Also, he or she is most likely welcome if he or she arrives alone or with very few companions: One stranger is seen as a courageous and creative individualist and likely greeted as potential innovator; a whole group of strangers, on the other hand, may be experienced as a threat and as a gang of invaders or spies and treated accordingly (Haag, 2011, p. 53f.).

What is peculiar about Simmel’s approach to these phenomena is his relational view of the effects of *strangeness*. A person is not strange, but the relationship that is established with him or her is marked by the imposition of strangeness. It is, in other words, socially defined as strange. The stranger comes from far away and has the potential to leave again because he cannot be forced to stay. This sets him or her aside from the normal local people, who usually do not have the option to leave. Because of the special condition under which strangers participate in the daily interactions, they are treated differently. Thus the relationship that is established with them is a strange relationship, and those participating in it experience strangeness as a result of the interpretation that they themselves ascribe to it.

The presence of the often foreign or—increasingly in contemporary terminology—alien person reminds the members of the host society that they ought to consider changing their ways. The effect is the experience of ambivalence: On the one hand, they welcome new ideas, but at the same time, they often see critique of their status quo as an unwelcome provocation, and they may take their anger out on the newcomer. This brings us back to the two groups that Simmel calls “M” and “N.” They start out being different but end up appearing similar.

At the same time, although the groups become more standard, the person becomes more and more unique; he or she is less and less a uniform product of his or her social environment. Thus, according to Simmel, eventually individualization not only profits the person who makes use of his or her talents, but it initiates global social change and reduces the differences between nations, provided there are enough courageous men or women who have the strength to be different.

In his analysis of rational capitalism, Max Weber describes the tension between two ethical impacts within the context of Christianity. This is

relevant to the impact of strangeness on change. Weber points out that the reversal of Christianity from **universalism** to **exclusivity** was crucial for developing utterly successful business ethics oriented toward gainful investment: Pre-reformation churches emphasized the brotherhood of all men (universalism), while Calvinist Protestantism spread among the baptized the notion of being a member of the chosen few, similar to the self-confidence of the Jewish people (exclusivity). The former rewarded conformity; the latter encouraged being different and having the courage to become a stranger.

Societies that were consistently universalist had no ethical foundation for making any difference between persons: They all were children of God, regardless whether they acknowledged that or not (Simmel, 1997, p. 203). If one of them turned out to be poor or in distress it was the brotherly duty of his fellow Christian to come to his or her aid. Granted, this did not always happen in real life, but it was nevertheless a referent to ethics with powerful implications for a strong drive toward equality as an ethical and political goal: Do unto thy neighbors as you would have them do unto you!

But who is that neighbor of mine? He is not the member of my own ethnic group or clan; he is the stranger from a despised population nearby, like the inhabitants of Samaria! Here Simmel may have seen a point of departure for his stranger. It is he, the stranger, who brings about progress, healing, and help from afar. The person with the strength to be different initiates the change that is needed to make equal opportunity for all more likely! This is the fascination emanating from the ambivalence between universalism and exclusivity.

The specific, rational type of capitalism Max Weber set out to study did not originate in the traditional universalistic cultures of Catholic and Orthodox Christianity in Italy, Spain, Russia, and Greece, in part maybe because everybody was everybody else's brother in Christ and had no right to witness his or her poverty unmoved. What was needed to justify the wealth of some compared to the poverty of others was an *exclusive* ethics, as was frequently deduced from a sacred text: "You are not allowed to take interest from your brother. From the stranger you may take interest" (Deuteronomy 23:20). In this religious passage, the stranger is not the clansman, but he is a partner in a business transaction (Nelson, 1969). As is well known, Muslims also are not allowed to take interest. Against this background it is plausible that modern capitalism did not develop well in areas where the religion of Islam is prevalent.

Be that as it may, it appears that there are two distinct sets of values that can be functional in overcoming sentimental feelings of compassion, so inappropriate in commercial dealings and certainly an impediment for the development of rational capitalism: One is the Protestant ethic as described by

Max Weber (1904/1920), the other is Benjamin Nelson's (1969) concept of tribalism. They can be sketched as follows:

1. Calvinist teaching on predestination made a Protestant ethic possible, according to which God, in his unfathomable grace, has chosen a few to be his children, to be saved, and to become successful and wealthy, whereas those poor "devils" who remained needy were simply not chosen by God. Who am I to worry about them, if even the Almighty has decided against them? This conviction gives the individual the courage to stand against the imposition of conformity and to be different from the rest of them. Indeed, typically, social and economic change was initiated by minorities who felt strong enough to be strangers and to resist the pressure of being like everybody else.

2. Contrary to the ancient version of Christian ethics, according to which a minority of "strangers" confronts the vast majority of universalist conformers, under the condition of tribalism the innovative persons are all members of small minorities: their respective clans. They thus find themselves surrounded by others with the same background. This may become the prevalent condition in the foreseeable future when progressive individualization will lead to people increasingly experiencing each other as being equally peculiar. The "stranger" is then functioning in the market as a normal and daily phenomenon. He does that in negotiations on the side of supply as well as on that of demand. The market, accordingly, is a forum of interaction where clansmanship on the one end and strangeness on the other end of the social spectrum collaborate in a very successful fashion, at least in the economy.

Toward an Ethics of Individualization

Simmel presents his own concept of ethics that is neither tribal nor national, nor even general; his concept is personal. He rejects a vague submission of the individual to the current unspecific general rules in the writings of Kant; instead, he encourages the question of what individuals owe to themselves, as was illustrated by the discourse between Rabbi Meir and his students. It is along this same line of reasoning, namely that each person must follow his or her unique calling, that Simmel criticizes Kant. As we saw in Chapter 1, Kant proposed the ethical principle that our conduct ought to be guided by rules that can be generalized for all human beings (a principle commonly referred to as *categorical imperative*). Simmel rejects that because it values conformity over uniqueness.

By contrast, he asks, “Can I not demand more of myself than of my average fellow citizen? Can I therefore not impose more stringent rules upon myself than upon others?” So while Kant’s egalitarian ethics is designed to prevent people from finding an easy way out for themselves, it also prevents them from performing anything above average. Simmel criticizes Kant’s categorical imperative for not taking into account the heroic and exceptionally good person. Kant may have had in mind an approach in ethics that would insure equality, but, according to Simmel, at the same time Kant also cut off the chance for a unique individual to overperform and to establish his or her level of ethical orientation above the broad average of everybody else as a stranger.

Accordingly, the thought of **individualization** emerges here as an evolutionary tendency that is inherent in the mutual exchange among persons. The emphasis on the growing respect for personal uniqueness will—according to Simmel—increase the tolerance within groups and permit individuals to be different from a general uniform standard. That, in turn, will encourage people to go beyond original boundaries imposed on group members in terms of spatial, economic, and mental relationships. In addition, the tolerance within groups serves as a push to place next to the initial “centripetalism of the individual group, a centrifugal tendency as a bridge to other groups, with growing individualization” of its members (Simmel, 1908/2009, p. 623).

For Simmel, the quality of uniqueness called *individuality* may either be derived from characteristics of the individual or from those of the group to which he or she belongs. The egalitarian and conformist model works on the basis of a contract between group and person like this: The group can demand conformity to its standards, and in return for following them, the individual is endowed with a kind of individuality based on belonging to that particular group.

In his example of the Quakers, Simmel shows how the close religious connection among the faithful combined with an emphasis on uniformity in behavior and attire tends toward anchoring individuality in the community rather than in the person (Simmel, 1890a, p. 49; Helle, 2013, p. 49). In the course of social evolution, the prevalent source of identity has shifted gradually from the group to the individual person. This makes it easier to find a place for an odd person to fit in, but at the same time, it makes it harder to find a replacement for a human being who is lost due to death or desertion.

In this context, Simmel looks at the way people deal with fashion and changing fads in society and interprets that against the background of the inability to cultivate a personal uniqueness out of fear of responsibility. The frustration resulting from the tacit admission that each individual has

the duty to cultivate his or her potential, together with the awareness of failure on this front, often leads a person to produce external uniqueness by wearing fashionable things and striking hairdos. This may be accompanied by a fear of isolation that may lead to bitterness and peculiarity rather than be experienced as a chance for individualization under the conditions of modernity.

Simmel points to the importance of the family in preventing the negative effects of modernization. Chapter 5 will be devoted to Simmel's sociology of the family. The narrow circle of close relatives in kinship groups is seen by him as an opportunity to balance the demands for rationality and emotional detachment in public. The high esteem in which Simmel holds the family as an intermediate social form in the context of his theory of social evolution is remarkable. Family ties are needed to fend off isolation, which if excessive—Simmel assumes—will lead to psychic deformation (Helle, 2013, p. 50).

The evolution of culture and society is tied to the coordination of processes on these separate levels: (a) the individual, (b) the family, (c) the group of friends and neighbors as intermediate between family and society, (d) society itself or a person's country, and finally (e) global humankind. Simmel shares the optimistic faith in a movement toward a world society in which first the intellectuals and later all those who are cosmopolitan in orientation feel interconnected with each other.

The history of the global dream of worldwide companionship goes back to aspects of ancient Christian faith and was revived in the Romantic period, as exemplified by the lyrics to the concluding movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. This dream turns up again in the demand by Karl Marx for all proletarians of all countries to unite. Marxist hopes for a world society were then shattered in the German version of a National Socialism during Hitler and with more lasting consequences in the proclamation of a special Chinese type of socialism.

His ideas of the innate dynamics of society led Simmel to his project of evolutionary ethics: One of his basic values is **equality**, but he distinguishes sharply between different concepts of equality. The attempt to make persons equal by putting them in uniforms is totally unacceptable to him. Uniformity cannot result in a human form of equality. Rather, an equality that is ethically based can only be realized by acknowledging that the incomparable individuality of each person is something exceedingly valuable. When this incomparability and uniqueness of the individual is accepted as an undisputed property of all, only then is the type of equality generated that Simmel accepts because it interconnects each one as a person in a society rather than as a number within the anonymous masses.

Simmel thus advocates a concept according to which equality is achieved through the acknowledgment and realization of everyone's claim to uniqueness and individuality. Following equality, the value of unity is introduced to prevent social evolution from leading to isolation and loneliness. Simmel's idea of unity leads him to a position according to which mutual exchange—understood as an interaction in which one person helps the other move toward self-realization—creates and solidifies unity step by step. His emphasis on individual uniqueness is compatible with the project of a worldwide community: Sooner or later we will all be strangers respecting each other's uniqueness.

Simmel has been called the expert on modernity by David Frisby (1944–2010) and others. The scholarly discourse on modernity, in turn, has led to the distinction between different types of modernity (Eisenstadt, 2000; Beck & Grande, 2010). Modernity, whatever that may be, was for Simmel not a state of affairs but a process. Simmel was an early champion of **processual thinking**, and we will have to look in more detail at what that means.

Process Plus Stability

In Greece, as early as 500 years before our common era, the necessity of a dynamic concept of reality was recognized by Heraclitus of Ephesus (535–475 BC) and his students. Therefore the theory of change is rooted not in Darwin but in Heraclitus and his school. According to Plato, Socrates said in the course of his oral teaching, to which his student Plato listened, “It was Heraclitus who said, Everything flows on; nothing stays in place.” Heraclitus is also quoted as having said, “You cannot step twice into the same river,” meaning that the river has changed between the two times because it flows on (Graham, 2011). Yet, it is, of course, still the same river. How else could we describe that it has changed?

The very notion of change presupposes that there is something that remains identical to itself, for otherwise we could not even talk about development as referring to a person or a thing that is still the same, even though somewhat different. Socrates is supposed to have given a speech on love that dealt with this problem: Even in the life of the same individual there is succession and not absolute unity.

A man is called the same, and yet in the short interval which elapses between youth and age . . . he is undergoing a perpetual process of loss and reparation—hair, flesh, bones, blood, and the whole body are always changing.

Which is true not only of the body, but also of the soul, whose habits, tempers, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, fears, never remain the same in any one of us. (Kraut, 2012)

But he or she remains the same person. And indeed, Heraclitus also developed his processual thinking against a stable background: “The only political attitude which we can safely extrapolate from the fragments is a lucid, almost Hobbesian appreciation of the fact that civilized life and communal survival depend upon loyalty to the law” (Graham, 2011). So we have here in Heraclitus himself the two aspects of a particular style of thought: awareness of the fluidity of reality, as the changing river, and maintenance of the identity of what is developing, in the case of Heraclitus as loyalty to the law.

This same duality of thought, process plus stability, can be discerned in Simmel’s social thought. Let us start with stability: Simmel pursues as a theme that runs through his publications the topic of personal identity. In traditional society, a person became an adult sometime between the ages of 18 and 21. Having grown to that age typically meant that the person was mature and well-developed and was not expected to change too much after that, except of course by getting old. Spouses, who married at that age because they loved each other and fit well as companions, could rely on still being a match years later. In modern society, in a happy case, they may continue to develop their personalities and develop and learn further in tandem and in a parallel way, so that ideally they change together and in the same direction. However, frequently one of the spouses develops one way and the other a different way (or not at all), and suddenly they may realize that they have grown apart.

This creates the potential for fear. If I go out to study, to travel, to work in remote and alien environments, if I have all these new and exciting experiences, will the persons close to me still recognize me and accept me after I return? This is the question of identity: Will I still be recognized as being identical to myself? Will the people who know me say, “He (or she) has changed!” or will they say, “He (or she) has become a different person.”? The second case may be described as a loss of identity: The returning person, for better or for worse, is no longer experienced as identical with the person who went out to learn new things.

Simmel, during the very first decade as author of scholarly publications, drew attention to his social thought with a two-volume book on ethics (Simmel, 1892, 1893). There he beseeches his readers to follow him in looking for philosophical foundations for a dynamic approach to ethics. Traditional ethics had been bogged down with the dictum by Plato that anything that claims to be true must be unchanging. The background, tied more or

less to common human weaknesses, is this: If I accept some statement as being the truth, I would like to assume that two years from now the same statement will still be true, if I use the same wording. Although this is totally plausible, Simmel presents it as highly problematic if applied to ethics because culture and society evolve over time. His reasoning is as follows.

The conditions under which humans lived in 2010 were, in many parts of the world, so vastly different from those of 1810 that it is flatly unreasonable to ask them to follow the same rules. For example, it is obvious that many rules, like speed limits on highways, could not possibly exist in the absence of automobiles. So, the case for a dynamic approach to ethics can be made easily in the area of technology, traffic, and others. But there are much more sensitive areas, like the way we conduct our private lives, where the general public tend to cling to the old rules for fear that any new rules may result in chaos. This is also understandable with regard to the widespread anxiety that total loss of orientation will prevail, for instance in people's marital and sexual lives.

To argue against these fears, Simmel refers to the topic of identity. We normally have an innate urge to remain who we are. If I return to acquaintances whom I have not seen for a long time, I of course hope that they will still recognize me and acknowledge me as the person they knew some time ago. This urge, the hope to retain my identity even though I may undergo considerable change, is the point of departure for Simmel's ethics. He teaches that what I decide to do today must be congruent with my personal way of developing. The deeds I perform now should not make me blush when I look in the mirror tomorrow.

By tying my behavior to the continuity inherent in my personal identity, I am not turned loose; I am not a freewheeling agent of spontaneity, even though I may no longer simply follow traditional rules in every situation of my life. I am not out of control because I am subject to the inner rules of my own identity, and those may be quite strict, indeed. But the result may, of course, be that what is good for me (and those close to me) may not be good for everybody. I am allowed to think that everything changes and everyone is different. So I will insist on doing what I think is right even though others do not understand me. The established system of ethics should not treat everybody the same, and we should adopt a new dynamic ethics. This is what Simmel suggests. As one can easily imagine, his point of view was not generally popular a century ago, nor can it be expected to be popular today.

Admittedly, there is immediate danger on the horizon: How to allow for the obvious fact that there are selfish and irresponsible people out there? In our Latin class we may have learned the idiom *quod licet Jovi non licet bovi*, meaning what is allowed for Jupiter is not allowed to the cattle in the field.

But Simmel is surprisingly optimistic, knowing that his readers and listeners are educated people, and he expects them not to take advantage of their privileged position in society but interpret their status as an above-average level of responsibility. Consequently, I must be able to do special things that cannot be recommended for everybody to do. And in addition, responsibility means that I am not free to do anything I want in a particular moment without thinking much about the consequences. What I do now must allow me still to be able to say yes to it in the future. I do not need to be ashamed of what I did because it is justified by the continuity of my personal life and by the unique situation I was in when I did it.

The history of culture repeatedly refers to “teachers” who did not count among those with whom they grew up because those learned men did not follow traditional ethical rules. Being a “prophet” has frequently been a life-threatening profession. Unfortunately this fate was not limited to religious personages. Socrates was ordered to drink poison because he was perceived to be misguiding the youth of Athens. Plato witnessed the trial of Socrates but was too ill to be present at the death of his beloved teacher. Being known as a follower of Socrates, Plato felt threatened in Athens. Disillusioned with the corruption and petty politics in Athens, Plato immigrated to southern Italy.

There Plato served a tyrant as court philosopher until the ruler came to dislike the sage’s ideas. Accordingly, the tyrant sold Plato into slavery for a good price. Had not a good friend purchased him and set him free, he would have remained a slave for the rest of his life. Later, back in Athens, Aristotle started an academy only to find himself subject to accusations similar to those that had led to the death of Socrates. As a result, Aristotle had to flee his native Athens to save his life. This is a sobering review of some of the early innovators, and of course—alas—the list of these strangers is far from complete. Fortunately, the people of Athens today identify with the victims, not the perpetrators of the old days.

Simmel presupposes that problems arising from the dynamization of ethics can be made a topic of empirical study. However, such research should itself not be burdened down with preconceived ethical concepts: “Just as the pathologist is not expected to pass judgment on the aesthetic value of a corpse being dissected by him, so the person involved in research about ethics should not moralize about the morals he studies” (Simmel, 1893, p. v). This is an early statement about the principle of value-free research in the social sciences.

Anticipating the potential results of such research, Simmel explains why the need for an evolutionary ethics will grow. Orienting life toward firmly founded values and following ideals guaranteeing unquestioned goals in life

will become more and more difficult (Simmel, 1893, p. 18). This will be the effect of weakening religious conviction and of critical thinking, which together make it less and less likely that traditional ideals of political, religious, or personal origin are being followed with unquestioned devotion. However, the fact that such orientations will be more difficult to entertain does not mean that the need for them has also disappeared. This observation points to a growing gap between supply and demand in the “market” for ethics and religion.

The evolution of society from a stage in which merely the narrow circles of kinship, tribalism, and community are relevant to stages in which wider and wider social circles become available, eventually leading to a worldwide field of interaction, must necessarily lead to an evolution of ethics. In fact, these two strains of development, the opening up of social structure and the dynamization of morals, depend on each other. The result of this reflection is the insight that even in identical situations, different people will act differently without thereby necessarily contradicting any general principle of moral behavior.

This effect of individualization frequently alienates the person from his or her primary associations, but at the same time, it makes it easier to be in contact with a large number of persons of different orientations. Provided the dynamization of ethics can keep up with this structural evolution, Simmel (1892, 1893) sees the chance for breaking down barriers between the respective morals of social classes, nations, and other groupings and replacing them with a global ethics of respect for the uniqueness of the individual as a fellow human being (1893, p. 30).

Conclusion

Chapter 3 deals with the structure of society and with prescriptions for how people should conduct themselves. The latter are usually referred to as “social norms.” Simmel sees change on both levels of analysis: The structure opens up, allowing us to live in wider company; the norms require making adjustments to this evolution by devising ideas for a dynamic ethics. These changes are the requirements to be met in order to enable individualization to progress as the decisive trait of modernization. To Simmel, a central task for the modern person is to recognize and develop to the fullest his or her innate potential. Fulfillment of this task hinges on the courage of the individual to be different to the point of becoming a stranger.

Systems of ethics can be distinguished by either emphasizing brotherly closeness among all humans (universalism) or stressing the superiority of a

certain group of people (exclusivity). Although universalism as a program may result in changes that make the world more peaceful, as an established condition it lacks tolerance for strangeness and leads to stable, but potentially rigid, conditions. Exclusivity, on the other hand, encourages strangeness and accordingly promotes change. Individuals may be reluctant to live the lives of innovators for two reasons: (a) fear of losing the approval of friends and other persons close to them and (b) fear of loss of identity. Many of the great innovators had to endure persecution and exile. They are remembered today for their courage as well as their contribution to evolution.

- Simmel promotes a dynamic approach to ethics. But how can that be implemented without causing confusion and insecurity among people who want to know what they ought to do?
- If more and more persons feel encouraged to live their lives as strangers, then how can anyone find orientation and rules for developing his or her own personality?
- How can universalistic and exclusive principles of ethics be reconciled in a society without breakdown of consensus and undue factionalism?
- How does one draw the line between courageous insistence on individualistic self-fulfillment on the one hand and loving consideration for relatives and friends on the other?