



# On Some Contemporary Problems of Philosophy (1912)

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GEORG SIMMEL

*On Some Contemporary Problems of Philosophy (1912)*

*Translators' Introduction*

“Über einige gegenwärtige Probleme der Philosophie” is in many ways an important and fascinating essay, with its dazzling insights, intriguing examples, and light touches of sarcasm. It manifests Simmel’s famous *Zeitinstink*, his great sensitivity to the intellectual currents of the day. However, despite its title, instead of providing a mere exposé of an assortment of the most topical and fashionable philosophical questions of the day, the text also provides a compelling and original overview of the history of philosophy, tracing a historical succession of basic categories characteristic of each cultural epoch and culminating in the dynamic concept of “life”, a narrative that will take magisterial expression in “Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur” (1918). The essay is also most revealing vis-à-vis Simmel’s own work. First, it explicitly expresses his newly-won distance to Kant, already evident from his recent books *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (1910) and *Philosophische Kultur* (1911) and looking ahead to the perspectives of his monograph *Goethe* (1913) and his final masterpiece *Lebensanschauung* (1918). Second, the essay situates Simmel’s own work in relation to the latest reversal in philosophy that he saw taking place during the time he wrote the essay, particularly with respect to the legacy of Hegelian philosophy and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. His philosophy thus appears as a wave in a larger stream. Third, the piece also gives a clue to how Simmel perceives the contribution of

his own life-philosophy, especially regarding the vitalist philosophy of Henri Bergson, whose work he began to read around the time he was completing his book *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche* (1907). Fourth and finally, the essay gives us a sense of how Simmel introduces movement into the very image of thought; that is, he perceives philosophy itself as life *in process* and not only *of process*.

The essay was first published the *Vossische Zeitung, Königlich privilegierte Berlinische Zeitung von Staats- und gelehrten Sachen* in November 1912. The following translation is based on the edition in the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe: Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1909-1918*, volume 12 part I, edited by Rüdiger Kramme und Angela Rammstedt (Surhkamp Verlag, 2001), pages 281—7.

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The advance of practical culture – technical as well as social – can at least in large part be formulated this way: all that we want to achieve and avoid evokes less and less a striving which leads immediately to these final purposes; rather, our work and interests are concerned with the means and conditions which bring about the desired result on their own. One may think of various kinds of prophylaxis: instead of healing sickness we try to prevent it from happening in the first place by creating more favourable conditions for life; and instead of punishing a criminal we seek a social constitution which prevents the development of criminals. And how few of the objects of our consumption result *immediately* from the work of our hands! We insert into the process a machine that makes the product, or we construct a complex series of means and means of means and only at the end does the thing desired emerge. Often enough while working on the means we forget the end result altogether, and with our capacities and consciousness we remain

permanently stuck with the conditions, which themselves ultimately appear to us as end results.

It is quite remarkable that philosophy, which seems so distant from such temporal constraints and occasional biases, has not escaped this general cultural form. The revolution in German philosophy of the 18th century, which was tied to Kant's name, transforms the question concerning how things are in their essence, meaning, and ends into another one: through what modes of knowledge can such questions be posed, answered, or rejected in the first place? In order to make possible this turn from things to their preconditions, however, Kant had to transform the world of things into "our representation". That is, Kant explained how what things in general can be for us is exhausted by what we know of them. This concentration of philosophical interest on the preconditions of knowledge, the adequacy of which is evidently subjected to sharp criteria, has not endured for the time being. As is well known, it has made room for an epoch of speculative philosophy which reached its peak in Hegelian philosophy, where thinking again aims to capture the whole of reality in its immediacy, unconcerned as it is with the means which make this capture possible or which are denied by their inadequacy. It is also well known that after the collapse of this period philosophy has again revived epistemological problems. Every content of knowledge that concerns things in general was and is allowed to exist in the manner that it is acquired by the particular sciences, and one may only inquire into the conditions of possibility and legitimacy of knowledge, into the foundations and methods of these specific disciplines. The point at which philosophy opens up as the first and most comprehensive science, as the highest unity of all knowledge, does not lie in any assertion about the things themselves, but in the knowledge of the conditions under which such knowledge becomes possible and real. This limitation of the field of philosophy to

epistemology, to the theory and critique of science, is a case of that cultural tendency toward “prophylaxis”: the course of work is directed not to what one actually wants to know but to the causes that produce this definite object.

Recently this direction in philosophy has been met with some countercurrents. The philosophy which has only cognition or knowledge as its object itself seems to be like someone who constantly polishes a knife and fork and studies their utility but has nothing to eat. On the one hand, the problem of knowing cognition itself [*das Erkennen zu erkennen*] has turned out to be much less fruitful than people believed it to be a few decades ago. On the other hand, the entirely unresolvable, and in many cases dogmatically fixed contradictions between the answers to this problem, suggest that there must be some error in how the question is being posed, although so far this error has not yet been formulated in a persuasive manner. In any case, once again there emerges the courage to open the gates of philosophy to the ultimate objective questions about the world and life that had appeared to have been shut out. Admittedly, these questions cannot be “answered” in the same unambiguously provable sense as the empirical sciences answer theirs, although there always remain possibilities for legitimating them: many kinds of answers relate to the truth, just as particles of ether playing about a non-polarized ray of light relate to its direction, and they constitute this ray even though the movements of any one particle do not coincide with *its* direction. Or perhaps philosophy has a conception of truth that is altogether different from the other sciences. For example, such a conception can be found in accurately expressing the relationship of the great intellectual figures to the world, a relationship that can evidently produce very different images of this world which are all equally justifiable within philosophy but appear erroneous when judged by other criteria.

It cannot be denied that for most of us in Germany all 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.

Another question that approaches the philosophical "worldview" branches out in many directions from this one. The whole of our existence [*Dasein*], which does not present itself to our understanding as a unity, breaks down into two aspects before the analytical gaze. On the one hand, we grasp existence as the summation and interweaving of contents, that is, through views and concepts, wished-for ends and sentimental tones, or the play of chance and necessity. On the other hand, we *experience and live through* all this. The process of life soon appears to seize first one then another content, and these contents gain a distinctive form of actualization from the rhythm of their movement, which is different from the one that they take on when they exist as logical conceptualizations, as eternal viewpoints, as aesthetic images, or as objective realities. Philosophy now by and large entails determining the *contents* with respect to their kind, measure, and context. To gain a purely logical, valuable, or metaphysical image of existence, it seeks to cut out life itself, the formal process through which these contents become ours, our lived experiences. What is called "life-philosophy" is generally nothing more than moral preaching or

reflection on certain typical contents of life. Among modern thinkers, at least, Schopenhauer is the first to philosophize about life itself. His ultimate aim was not to ask about the meaning and value of whatever there is in life, but about the sense and value of mere life [*bloßes Leben*], the colour that radiates through all contents by the fact that they are lived in experience. This fact is treated here for the first time in an independent sense and as constitutive of a worldview, though not with explicit emphasis. He asks what life means and what is of value, merely because it is life and not because it experiences this or that. Nietzsche took up this problem with a much sharper awareness, though admittedly he solved it in the opposite manner than Schopenhauer did. All contents and values – ethical, intellectual, and aesthetic – are for him configurations of the life process as a whole, and if he sees the ‘will to power’ [*Wille zur Macht*] in them all, it is because for him life itself is will-power [*Machtwille*]. It is not as if we lived first and then had the will to power, but that both are only different names for one and the same thing. Whatever meaning the ethical or scientific, aesthetic, or religious contents that we experience in life may have, that meaning is equal to the quantum of life that is invested in them, and they have no proper ‘value’ or ‘law’ of their own. The entire ideal demand concerning human beings and humanity therefore has its singular meaning in the elevation and perfection of life, purely according to the rhythm, intensity, and form that belong to it as life and not according to the norms of these or those contents of life.<sup>1</sup>

Bergson has placed the concept of life at the centre of a worldview from an entirely different perspective. For him life is the fundamental physical-metaphysical event of the world-process in general. This *élan vital*, which not only carries but also makes up

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1 May I perhaps refer here to the further elaborations to be found in my book Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

existence, from the outset follows an ascending line that is endlessly divided, becoming more and more life all the way to human consciousness. It also follows a descending line, where it sinks into mechanism and matter or, more precisely, becomes mechanism and matter. From this absolutely primal attitude toward life, from a conception of life simply as continuous and ceaseless becoming, it already follows that the contents of life existing on their own account and in their own right cannot be set against or next to this conception. Here, however, is where the need for supplementing this philosophy may lie. What in Nietzsche properly concerns only human existence and its specific values becomes cosmic in Bergson: all that there is, irrespective of its content, is a special development of that *élan vital*. And if Bergson does not celebrate scientific knowledge, which appears to him merely as formed by practical necessities and as symbolically and artificially mechanized, but rather *intuition*, which immediately feels its way into the nature of things and fills itself up with their existence, then this ultimately means that only life can conceive life. The result is that the nature of things is a life-process, and that life in a sense closes in on itself, while as cognition it also removes all the rigidities that brought with them its final concentration on the contents that had been wrested from the flow of life and then set apart in their abstract self-sufficiency. These contents again dissolve into that flow, and thus cognition for its part must again become life, must become their life, rather than the arrangement of fixed images, if it is to arrive at its meaning and truth.

The philosophy that stems from the life-process, understood as the highest generality and ultimate formative force of our existence, seems to me to express the most significant motif that the present has introduced into the development of the philosophical spirit. One could indeed see this as a conceptual advance. Greek philosophy was based on the concept of substance, on an



unalterable essence that lay under and over all the fluctuations of phenomena, as well as on the fixed forms in which these phenomena find their shape and which are reflected in eternally valid, systematically linked concepts, the bearers of all truth. It was against this world-view – which had found the core of all being and cognition in the immobility of substance, forms, and concepts, and over which the Middle Ages basically only constructed an arch and gave it a Christian-theological colouring – that the modern era set itself by finding the decisive form of existence in movement. And indeed it did so in the movement that is the easiest and clearest to understand and formulate: the mechanical one. Now it was no longer valid to summon up an image of the world as solid substance and in logically connected concepts, but in laws according to which the movements of being were calculable. Thus, if reality is changing at every moment, then the spirit no longer finds in matter and forms what is valid, decisive, and dominant in reality but only in the laws of change. Here, the Kantian response changed nothing. Kant only conceived of reality as a representation of reality and studied it according to the preconditions of this act of representing. The cosmos remained for him a mechanical movement whose laws it was the task of science to discern, and since Kant did not believe that mechanics could be applied to organic life, he cut it off from the domain of what can really be known.

The philosophy of life now appears as the third position after both of these. Life as the metaphysical fundamental principle, as if it were freeing subject and object from themselves, relates to the principle of mechanical movement roughly in the same manner as this relates to the substantialism of the Greeks. If one surveys the history of European spirit in its most coarse features, it runs unmistakably and increasingly – though naturally with countless exceptions, deviations, and setbacks – towards “enlivening” the worldview, along with the principle by which its reality opens itself

to the spirit. The reduction of reality and cognition to movement and mechanical laws now appears as an intermediate stage, as a preparation for the principle of life. What the philosophy founded on this principle offers in the present, however, is still tentative. In no way do its successes amount to a search for a secure new basis for understanding the world, if only because we all have a more or less clear or obscure feeling that the fecundity of the present forms of spiritual existence are approaching the point of exhaustion. Nevertheless, this philosophy – however incomplete and in need of being supplemented or equipped with the hope of elevating the development of the spirit to the next level – is thus far perhaps the purest expression of that observable direction of a constantly changing thought about the “enlivening” of its self and its world.

*Translated by Olli Pyyhtinen and Thomas Kemple*