

# Georg Simmel

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# Georg Simmel · Gesamtausgabe

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## Moral Deficiencies as Determining Intellectual Functions\*

Since Socrates defined virtue as a science, attempts to discover a constant and fundamental relation between intellect and morality have not ceased to be made. On the one hand, higher intelligence has been looked upon as cause of better morality; and on the other, moral perfection has been regarded as an instrument of intellectual progress. Inversely, intellectual limitation has often been considered a condition of a certain moral elevation – e. g., the blessedness of the »poor in spirit,« the alleged evil effects of »enlightenment,« etc., – and likewise it has been thought that superior understanding might be attained on the path of moral depravity. Finally, instead of connecting these two movements by immediate causality, they may be regarded as separate growths from a common root, and hence indirectly connected. The direct opposition between such assertions, all of which have an apparent validity, points to a fault in the manner of putting the question. This error probably lies in the fact that these discussions deal with conceptions of too vague and general a nature. The conception of knowledge, like that of morality, covers countless acts, which partake in some degree of the quality designated, just as is the case with the particulars included under the general ideas of happiness or egotism or liberty. It is to be hoped that such vague, general conceptions in scientific ethics will soon give way to the description of specific, psychological processes, included under the general heads, – a parallel to the achievement of Herbart in regard to »*Seelenvermögen*.« A certain preparation for this end may, however, be found in developing

\* This article is part of the second volume of the author's »*Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*« [GSG 4], which is shortly to appear. The reader finds here hardly more than a general outline of the original article. From want of space, it has been considerably shortened without being able to consult the author.

clearly the contradictions in the general relations between Intellect and Morality. In illustration of this point, the following considerations are offered as removing the apparent paradox that development of intellect can be brought about by moral insufficiency, or, *vice versa*, that deficiency of understanding and thought should go with morality.

It may be admitted at once that in many cases intellectual development is united with moral elevation. We need but name Socrates, Jesus, Spinoza. Despite this, it may be asserted that certain specific experiences are not compatible with absolute purity of morals. Morality, to be sure, is an effectual means towards the understanding of human nature, because, through the destruction of the personally egoistic barriers between men, it becomes easier for the psychic phenomena in the life of one individual to be experienced sympathetically by another. In order to understand a man fully it is necessary to put one's self in his place, or, at least, to bear a psychological resemblance to him. In the case of sin or of weakness in the face of temptation, the pure and the noble obviously cannot compete in thoroughness of comprehension with those to whom the reproduction of sinful conditions is an easy matter. The moral man lacks the psychical experience which gives the immoral one so thorough a comprehension of the immorality of others. Just as the man of low and mean mind is unable to understand the high-minded and noble one and regards him as a problem, explicable only by attributing to him secret thoughts and purposes similar to his own, in like manner the pure man is too unlike the scoundrel to comprehend him completely. Criminals become valuable assistants of the police, not only because of their knowledge of the practices of rogues and of their hiding-places, but rather by their much better understanding of the processes and motives of the criminal mind. This knowledge permits them to draw definite inferences from given situations. For them it is an easy matter to forge a psychological chain with scattered links of evidence.

Vileness and temptation are powerless to touch certain natures. Even in schools, which are often hot-beds of the most unclean thoughts and words, and in which the immorality of a

few corrupted individuals becomes endemic, there are always some pure natures which are innocuous to the poison and in whose presence the obscene talk ceases. A sensitive power of reaction against evil which holds knowledge of immorality to be a taint, and which looks upon initiation into it as participation in guilt, is ethically admirable. It is certainly most desirable that as many as possible should live in a sphere of moral purity. The gain, however, is at the price of losing a knowledge of certain active powers in the life of mankind. It is a noteworthy fact that the conception of an act forms the first inclination to its execution, since a psychophysical association exists between the thought of an action and the steps towards its performance. When the tendency to action is completely removed by other causes, a clear theoretical recognition and conception of it is an impossibility. It is an acknowledged fact that the occupation of the mind with forbidden thoughts is frequently the incentive towards action, and success in leading the thoughts away from the forbidden fruit means prevention of the act. Inversely, personal consummation of the deed is the condition of pursuing it in thought to its logical consequences. Who can say whether those high natures that combine a deep comprehension of the being of man with elevated morality – who can say whether it was not in hours of temptation, of moral confusion, of alienation from God (for the noblest men least of all escape such troubles), that they attained their clear and penetrating insight into man's soul?

Genius, indeed, is able to concentrate in itself the experiences of the entire race in such a way that it can express the most profound truths concerning affairs of which it has no personal experience. The psychological conditions of the achievements of a man of genius are very often not of his own making, but of innate organization, just as is the case with so-called instinctive action or knowledge. A highly gifted judge of human nature may, accordingly, be able to comprehend fully the depths of the criminal soul, or the purity of a Jesus or a Francis of Assisi, without experiencing the emotions involved, – usually a necessary condition of such psychological comprehension. In any case, however, the man of genius, and

indeed every one who has any trace of insight, must possess an inherited constitution, which, by reacting in a determined way upon the present or imagined situation, may lead to the full comprehension of it. Unless we wish to assume a pre-established harmony or miracle, the organic condition produced by any passion remains the only source of its further suggestions. Moral imperfection is therefore a condition of the comprehension of immoral passions. In order to bring out the consequences of this necessity, let me direct attention to a single point. The countless works on moral philosophy do not contain a description of the moral life as it really is, but rather a compendium of an ideally perfect morality. The moralists describe life as it ought to be, and, though they may be convinced that the conditions are different in real life, still they look upon the ideal rather than on the deviations from it as the subject of their study. Ethics with such a goal in view seems a most useless science, and fully deserves the cold glances bestowed on it, not by practical men alone, but by representatives of other sciences as well. The chief cause for this error is to be sought in a practical, ethical idealism and enthusiasm, which substitutes exhortation for philosophy and converts the moral philosopher into a teacher of morality. Theory should hold itself aloof from any approval or disapproval of its objects. In making human acts the subject of scientific study, the student must not allow his high regard for morality, any more than his abhorrence of vice, to exercise any influence upon the form or matter of his investigation. In a modern work on ethics, the statement may be found that the student of ethics writes in a different frame of mind from that of the anthropologist or the botanist. This seems radically wrong, — *i. e.*, not that it is not the case, for it is so most frequently, but that, as far as the welfare of science is concerned, it ought not to be the case. It is just as if the anatomist, in his work of dissection, were asked to take into consideration the beauty or ugliness of the body on the dissecting-table. Whatever the source of the desire for knowledge may be, it seems proper to consider it historically as an aid in the struggle for existence which has come to be valued for its own sake. The truest and purest research is that which is an aim

in itself, and in which all moral ends which it might serve retire into the background. It will therefore be of great benefit to ethics as a science, if the student does not allow his personal enthusiasm for morality to exert any influence upon his investigations. A description of morality degenerates into an empty scheme if immorality is not placed in juxtaposition, in reference to which the true meaning and purpose of ethical rules can alone be grasped. To describe either by itself is as unmethodical as to write the history of spiritualism without constant reference to materialism.

The ethical students who treat morality from an abstract and one-sided point of view are like artists who work without models. True, the artist must not represent the reality with the varied and accidental mixture of all its component parts, but a side of it drawn from a certain point of view. For all that, the *certa idea* which Raphael thought necessary for the representation of beautiful forms is merely a guide, teaching how to combine certain features of reality, although a complete knowledge of the subject is the condition under which one side of the same can be correctly represented. Temptation and sin, selfishness and the depths of sensuality, humiliation, remorse, and purification, – all these experiences, without which the moral life of mankind would be a colorless, incomprehensible mechanism, would fail to be understood if personal experience were not at hand to fill out in part, at least, the empty phrases. The task of understanding these powerful elementary passions of the human soul is very difficult from the height of official station, as well as in the normal and correct life led by many scholars. The danger is always at hand, either of giving us at best an anatomy of the moral life, while the question under discussion is really one of its physiology, or of falling into a one-sided optimism. Undeniably, this is a point in which a theoretical knowledge gains depth and thoroughness from experience of comparative immorality, either present or past.

The possible intellectual results of immorality discussed up to this point are two. First, our immorality enables us to recognize the presence of immorality in others, and thus furthers knowledge. Second, immorality, in dealing with cer-

tain definite fields of knowledge, develops intellect as a function, and strengthens its power independently of the object on which its force is exercised. From this latter point of view, there is no immoral instinct which cannot, under certain circumstances, produce a sharpening of the intellect. Since a knowledge of affairs is a means to increase of power and to better attainment of all one's ends, therefore it is furthered directly in proportion to the degree in which fitness of means to ends is secured.

In turning from the point of view of objective scientific research to practical life, a glance is sufficient to show that for reaping selfish benefits, for attaining personal ends, much more acuteness and intellectual activity of every kind is brought into play than is the case where the ends in view are altruistic. The existence of immorality being assumed, the impulse to individual advantage roused by it makes much greater demands on shrewdness, prudence, and ingenuity than would be made in similar circumstances by a pure moral disposition. The liar must have a good memory. Every form of immorality presupposes sharpness of observation, caution, and calculation of results unnecessary to a moral man. The maintenance of an unusual position always calls for increased intellectual effort, because other devices are required than those involved in a typical mode of life. The immoral man swims against the stream, and hence, *ceteris paribus*, needs more strength and more quickness than he who is borne along with the general current, therefore the most dangerous knave is the shrewd one. The »Hexenhammer« of 1487 asserts that devils are particularly remarkable for their sagacity. It is impossible for immorality to maintain itself long when combined with stupidity. Through a want of adaptation of means to ends, it soon comes into collision with social morality, and is then made harmless either by direct paralysis of its faculties or by punishment. The saying, »Honesty is the best policy,« can be accepted only in the sense that, as a rule, the intellectual and other means at the disposal of immorality do not suffice for avoiding a collision with the normal arrangement of the world; at the same time the proverb implies that dishonesty has need

of certain expedients, in order to succeed, with which a straight-forward career can successfully dispense, provided no hostile powers are brought to bear against it. As soon as the necessity of a power makes itself felt, the »eternal fitness of things« provides for the possibility of its development. Since it is impossible for immoral persons – in whom these qualities are lacking – to maintain their position, a selecting process among them is necessary, and shrewdness must be developed as the most fitting instrument of evil.

However, it is not this indirect connection which, by virtue of its utility, makes immorality a means of intellectual development. This takes place in a more direct way where immorality does not concern itself with *deeds*, for which thought and the stimulation of thought in others are relatively minor points, but with cases in which immorality stands in closer relation to these theoretical conditions, – *i. e.*, where a lie is involved. We are not concerned here with the lie in the light of its evolution, but with its reflex action upon the spirit of the liar. There is no doubt that a lie develops many powers which would have remained latent in case of adherence to truthfulness. The mind grows wary and cautious, comprehensive and at the same time concentrated, delicate and yet strong, to a degree which would never have been reached, if it had always progressed in a straight line and in the path of truth. Falsehood, so to speak, creates new worlds which, however, may have connection at many points with actual existence. The popular saw, »One lie breeds seven,« expresses well the fact that a lie, in order to attain its end, must call out an invention which has a close relationship to poetry. Falsehood must be capable of altering and polishing the forms of logic and judgment, the universally recognized premises of thought, in such a way that they may suggest a conclusion which, nevertheless, they essentially exclude. The liar must at all times hold in his consciousness two trains of thought, two entirely different orders of ideas, – the one which he knows to be true, and the false one formed on entirely different principles which, however, is to appear to the deceived to be the true one. This state of affairs presupposes a psychological intelligence which is one of the



most important weapons in the arsenal of the liar. Besides this, it clearly produces and develops a power of invention, and on the theoretical side a consistency and objectivity, the intellectual effect of which is only weakened because the logical consequences of the lie, and the mask of uprightness with which it faces others, sometimes make a victim of the liar himself. For instance, when the same falsehood is reiterated again and again, the liar finally believes in it himself. Here, it is true, the lie loses its value as a means of sharpening the intellect and of increasing its objectivity, since now the double series of images, between which, otherwise, the liar has to maintain some sort of harmony, no longer exists. The necessity of maintaining such a harmony creates a mobility of mind, a great readiness in meeting an objection raised by one train of ideas by making a variation in the other series. This double objectivity which the two series require are confounded in the mind of the dupe.

But the possible improvement of the intellect through falsehood is often changed into its contrary. The very dualism of the logical series, which sharpens the intellect when the division between them is kept distinct, makes the same dull when this separation is no longer successfully maintained, the appreciation and the instinct of truth and the true conception of its standards being lost. This is especially true of great, all-permeating falsehoods, which form a part in the lives of so many people. They are not merely verbal fictions, but enacted lies. Our public and private life shows at every point remains of formerly efficient forms, which stand in direct contradiction to modern thought and, from this stand-point, must be regarded as falsehoods. Upon critical examination of the participation of the educated classes in the life of the church, or the relation of higher and lower officials in all circles and walks of life, falsehood in word and deed is met at every step, produced by cowardice, convenience, habit, and even by the honest belief that a revolt against the evil would work more mischief than a *laissez-faire* policy. In such a case a clear, intellectual acuteness in the conception of scientific truths must suffer, although it *can* coexist with a full recognition of the falseness in a part of

our existence. Indeed, the very consciousness of the falsity of such a position has often been the spur to a purer and clearer conception of reality. Immorality can only be looked upon as guilty when it is clearly recognized as such. The act which makes it so – setting the falsehood in its true light – is, at the same time, the source of a wide-spread and penetrating knowledge. Another fact which takes away from the intellectual value of the so-called social lies is their passive acceptance by the individual, who, for the most part, simply lives on in the manner traditionally enjoined upon him. The free, formative element is lacking, as well as the necessity of measuring one's own strength at every step with a world whose aim is an entirely opposite one, and of maintaining, by constant modifications, the logical consequences of word and deed, – in all of which particulars the specific falsehood proved its strengthening effects on the intellectual powers.

The strengthening of the mind, which we denoted to be directly connected with immorality, is not generally the result of a wrong motive; but the case is different when the motive-power is self-love. Wit and learning are grounds for vanity, a passion which prompts us to energetic mental activity. This example, though simple, needs especial consideration because of the attitude of disapproval assumed towards this subjective motive as annihilating the value of all knowledge thus gained. Of all motives of intellectual activity which are not absolutely pure, vanity seems, however, least of all to modify the results obtained. In contradistinction to political prejudice as influencing historical research, – bigotry creeping into a study of natural law, or the predetermination of the result to which investigation will lead, – in contradistinction to all this, the vain desire of appearing especially clever or learned seems comparatively harmless. For the very reason that vanity bears so purely personal a character, it will not incline to a deviation of judgment such as might be the case where the wrong motive has a certain objective result and tendency in view. A peculiar resemblance is here particularly noticeable between the most objective and the most subjective pursuits. In both cases, although for different motives, that inequality in the treatment

of subjects disappears, which is usually present as the outcome of a special leaning towards one side or the other. An entirely unprejudiced attitude, because an indifferent one, towards both sides may arise equally well from a principle of truth-seeking, which requires unquestioning acceptance of the facts taught by realities, as from a pure subjectivity which takes no interest in matters for their own sake.

In practice, the integrity of this position suffers from a socio-psychological bias, by which vanity is more gratified by the attainment of certain results than by the attainment of others. If one of two scientists discovers a cure for consumption and the other brings to light a remedy for emphysema, though the two might have exerted equal ingenuity and labor in their research, the former would be admired incomparably more than the latter, for the accidental reason that his work would enjoy a wider range of utility than that of his fellow-scientist. In like manner, the practical interest taken in the result of investigation is reflected in the importance of the process of thought by which the end is reached. If the appreciation of research were in exact and unchanging proportion to the amount of intellectual exertion involved, and depended on that alone, then vanity of recognition could not work mischief to the honesty of thought by a prejudice in favor of certain results. In point of fact, however, popular opinion sees evidence of deeper thought in certain results than in others, which leads to the temptation to obtain these conclusions at any cost. This is manifested most of all in criticism, in pessimism, in scepticism, briefly, in the negation of thought in contradistinction to its assertion. A simple, positive truth, no matter how much acuteness and penetration its discovery may involve, does not possess the same fascination of ingenuity for the generality of people which belongs to destructive criticism – to Mephistophelean negation of everything traditionally true and beautiful. In condemning an action or a usage, or, in fact, anything in actual existence, the critic in so doing raises himself above the object of his attack. He stands upon an higher plane and feels himself master of the general rules and restrictions to which the matter under discussion is subject. This position is the more easily

obtained the more criticism is purely negative, for weak points will be found to exist in everything empirical, even though it be the most complete of its kind. A significant shrug, although no reason may be assigned for it, is sufficient with some to indicate the existence of extraordinary hidden cleverness on the part of the critic. This mode of criticism wins for him not only an unassailable reputation for powers of judgment, but also a mysterious authority over his listener. Furthermore, the more extended and the more inclusive the range of a judgment, the more enlightened does the critic appear to himself and to others; and the most comprehensive judgments are declared in negative, sceptical, and pessimistic assertions. A positive judgment, being definite, is also limited in itself. While it is difficult to mention the qualities which a certain thing possesses, it is an easy matter to point out its deficiencies, and easiest of all to look at the matter from a sceptical point of view. An unfavorable criticism will therefore be apt to be clothed in generalities and will seem to deal with the subject in its entirety. Finally, if pessimism, in its popular and accidental form even more than in its scientific and essential one, not only judges, but condemns the whole world, if it despises that which is revered by many, and regards as a matter of indifference what to others seems worthy of attainment even by struggle, – by that very act of criticism it will appear to rise above the level of the commonplace. The polite literature of the present day, as well as popular philosophy and our topics of conversation, alike indicate this rank growth of pessimistic views, only too frequently the product of vanity and morbid self-analysis, which, in turn, flourish best in the soil of pessimism.

Another application of this principle forms an integral part of our theme, – the sexual relation. When the importance of the sexual passions in all the relations of life is taken into consideration and the strength of the feelings concerned, the interest in the matter is an entirely natural one; nevertheless, every discussion of the topic outside a most limited circle is considered offensive. Hesitation is manifested in approaching the subject even in a most serious and scientific mood, because of the consciousness of arousing a foreign interest. In conse-