

Towards Moral and Authentic Generalization: Humanity, Individual Human Beings and Distortion

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Abstract

The article treats the issue of generality. How may one conceive of the relationship between the uniqueness of individuality and the commonality of the human (species and society) without reduction? Can generalization be made moral – eschewing stereotypes in society – and can it be made authentic – enacting a human science which treats the individual as a thing-in-itself? Simmel’s seminal intervention was to see generality as a necessary kind of distortion. In contrast, this article offers rational models of the one and the whole which expect to retain the uniqueness of the one; and it suggests characteristics of human embodiment (capacities, potentialities) that speak to individuality and generality at the same time. The article ends with a reconsideration of distortion as a humane artistic representation, by way of the work of Stanley Spencer.

Keywords: Generalization; Cosmopolitanism; Individuality; Humanity; Representation; Distortion.

Introduction

In this article I want to approach the old problem of generalisation but in the new context of cosmopolitanism, which I would define here as an attempt to apprehend the relationship between the human species and the individual human being as a scientific and a moral reality.¹ The nature of the human condition – its ontology – is that the universality of humanity represents itself always and only in the specificity of individual embodiment. This relationship is real and fundamental, different in nature to all other relations of a symbolic or discursive or rhetorical kind which human beings have constructed and to which they might be party: society, culture, community, nation. These symbolic relations, as constructs of language and classification, should not obfuscate the ‘cosmopolitan’ insight that all of humanity is one (a *cosmos*) and that human life manifests itself always and only in individual instantiations (in *polis*). Hence the starting point of my enquiry: there is a uniqueness to each of us, to every human being; our individuality is irreducible. How then do we assemble human beings together? How do we generalise upon the human, both for the purposes of social science and for the purposes of social policy? Generalisation is both an issue of scientific method and of liberal democracy (Amit & Rapport 2012).

Here is the ethnographer Vincent Crapanzano (2004: 6) expressing something of my quandary:

I find that the singular has often been sacrificed to the general in the human sciences and that, more often than not, this has resulted in a distorting simplification of the human condition; in a failure fully to appreciate its ambiguous nature and the ambivalence it generates; in an implicit, if not explicit, emphasis on determinism; in an indifference to human creativity, transgressive possibility and imaginative play; and in a failure to address the question of human freedom.

But such a realization is not recent and takes us back at least to the seminal essays of Georg Simmel from 1908, ‘How is Society Possible?’ and ‘The Problem of Sociology’. Here Simmel wrestled with the issue of generality and how it might be seen to relate to individuality. Generalization was, he felt, a *necessary* idiom, in whose terms human society might function *justly* and human science might function *rightly*. Hence, my concerns in this article are two-fold: I want to re-examine the issue of applying generalization both in the field of a rational human science and in the field of just, liberal statecraft. And the two concerns are really treatments of the same question: is it possible to conceive of the relationship between the uniqueness of individuality and the generality of the human (species and society) without reduction or corruption? Generalization might be necessary but can it also be made moral – eschewing stereotypes in society – and can it be made authentic – enacting a human science which treats the individual as a thing-in-itself? My course in the article is from the more theoretic to the more empiric,

for generalization is, finally, a very personal issue: how might I know another human being and be known?

Simmel's Distortions

Let me begin by rehearsing some of the points of Simmel's exposition and his conclusions. 'Society exists where a number of individuals enter into interaction', he begins (1971: 23), and its unity rests in the interaction of these individual elements. This means, moreover, that societies are structures inexorably composed of unequal elements, since the individual members are differentiated according to their natures, their life-contents and their destinies. A society may amount to a cosmos but it is nevertheless 'a web of qualitatively differentiated phenomena' (Simmel 1971: 19).

A liberal society will endeavour to engender a democratic equality, Simmel continues, by dealing with a reasoned *equivalence*, between people or functions or positions. However, any society must yet function on the basis of certain *distortions* which it decides upon and which operate as 'a priori, operative categories' (Simmel 1971: 12). It is only by means of these distorting categories that it is possible to move from individuals to members. For individuality is, by definition, incomprehensible: one can neither understand that of another nor incorporate it by extraneous measures. 'Perfect cognition presupposes perfect identity' (Simmel 1971: 9), and we can neither know nor represent an individuality that is not our own. For the construct that is society, therefore, certain distortions must be brought to bear upon individual reality: 'we see the other person generalized, in some measure' (Simmel 1971: 9).

Three main kinds of distortion can be identified, Simmel elaborates. They might be termed the 'human', the 'personal', and the 'social'. In the first, we conceive of each human being as being a representative of a certain *human* type such as is suggested (to us) by his or her individuality: the individual becomes for us 'a general human being'. In the second, we conceive of each human being as being an ideal or full or perfect representative of himself or herself: we idealize or exaggerate his or her personality (such as we perceive it) so as to make him or her into 'a general version of himself or herself'. In the third, we conceive of each human being as representing his or her social placement or membership or role: the individual becomes 'a general group functionary'. Society is possible, Simmel concludes, by virtue of generalizations which operate as so many *a priori* veils which at once detract from individuality and substitute for it.

The problem of sociology, indeed of all science of the human, is that whereas the explanation of human facts most frequently entails 'an exercise of psychological knowledge', it is the case that 'the scientific treatment of psychic data is not thereby automatically psychological' (Simmel 1971: 32). The science of society is

a study of certain structures, symbols and categories that derive from psychic creativity and are imbued with psychological meaning and yet which attain an objective reality which will possess its own formal properties: patterning, compatibilities, development. One can say that the forms of social life operate as kinds of veil behind which the psychic contents live. It is impossible to accede to generality in any other way, whether as members of society or scientists of society. There may be ‘always one reality’ and only one reality, but we cannot grasp it in its immediacy and wholeness; we can consider it only from particular viewpoints and attempt to make it into ‘a plurality of mutually independent scientific subject matters’ (Simmel 1971: 33).

It was the human tragedy, Simmel concluded, that individual things-in-the-world could not be known in themselves but only in terms of extraneous forms. Hope lay in a kind of dialectical method by which one zigzagged between forms and contents – between one kind of representation and another – and thereby came to an understanding of how one influenced the other into gaining a mutual state of co-presence. But even here one dealt with *representation*: a zigzag between one kind of distortion and another.

It becomes clear the extent to which Simmel’s sociology subscribed to Kantian notions of *phenomena* as against *numina*: the extent to which the world becomes an object of contemplation and intention only by way of categories of human perception. Simmel did not agree with Kant that these categories were ‘transcendent’, or independent of historico-social process. For Simmel, categories achieved objectivity as a result of the ongoing process of social interaction: they emerged from the flux of life and derived from experience, in such a way that they stood formally over and against the noumenal as kinds of practical bulwark. Nevertheless, they were categories: the transition from individual to human society and from individual to human species was effected by a process of generalization which transformed the unknowable thing-in-itself into idealized and ideal-typical forms. The forms acted as kinds of necessary approximation and equivalency, with their own histories and relations, by which one hoped the ‘tragedy’ of the veils surrounding truth might be ameliorated by distortions which were ‘reasonable’.

Beyond Simmel

Simmel was not entirely happy with his conclusions, and I am not either. This becomes clear in other observations of his, in *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* (1991). Let me elaborate briefly.

It was Kant’s formulation that everything observed and known – observable and knowable – is a phenomenon: something delineated by human powers of cognition, by its being incorporated into a human symbolic scheme. Human cognition

transforms things-in-themselves into symbols with homes in conceptual frameworks; beyond this, reality is left as it is. Human existence thus gives rise to a certain plurality: things do not remain only things. As well as being parts of a natural order beyond knowledge and definition, things come to be rendered as part of any number of symbolic orders. The things of the world become symbolic forms for us human beings, as well as maintaining their status as real objects beyond any forms and any relations to us, untouched in and for themselves.

But this also smacks of relativism – idealism, certainly – and Simmel wished for a means to re-ground form in the real and to make human *a priori* more authentic to being. The solutions he preferred came from Nietzsche and from Schopenhauer. For Nietzsche, according to Simmel (1991: 142-8), there are fundamental aspects of the human condition which are independent of social formation even though they might of necessity be expressed in social forms. The individual, for instance, is a final element of being – there is nothing greater, socially, than his or her organicism – and it is this individuality which human action inevitably expresses. Personality, for Nietzsche, becomes the ultimate value of existence: a full and mature individual personality possesses a value that is absolute and transcendent. This is because *humanity*, which also exists as a fundamental aspect of reality independent of social formation, exhibits itself in individuals. "Humanity follows a *single* line to oneself", as Nietzsche advises (1979: 86). Even if individuals only appear in society, and even if there is an impossible dichotomy such that social forms are never able to subsume the individual, still there is a sense in which there is a continuous, real, evolutionary line between the human species and the particular form of life which the individual human being embodies. Individuality and humanity have a conjoined reality against which that of social forms, norms, concepts and categories are recognisable as contingencies. There are real human values and interests and real individual natures. It is real individual nature to be unequal, for instance, Nietzsche asserts. Differences and distances between individuals are natural facts, and these differences are the hope of evolution: humanity proceeds forward not as an assemblage but through its particular, successful individual expressions. Humanity cannot be defined apart from individuals, while the latter possess ultimate value because of their embodiment of states or moments of the former. Even though there can be no social comprehension of individual being and its worth, still individuals, as things-in-themselves, possess a recognisable objectivity and meaning. Each individual embodies the evolutionary culmination of the human species. Their meaning is their uniqueness, their difference and distance from everything else: here is enshrined the future of the species as a whole.

Morally, Simmel was fearful of identifying with Nietzsche too completely. How might one ward off extreme self-centeredness and selfishness, and solipsism? He was happy to turn to Schopenhauer, therefore, to complement the Nie-

tzschean picture with an emphasis on social obligation and identification. The objectivity of social forms was a means to inculcate a sentiment of belonging and an ethic of duty. One could be at once individual *and* recognize a duty to a humanity which manifested itself in a current social whole, an ambient society. Through social forms, the individual could find meaning beyond himself or herself; there could be social unity and mobilization towards common ends in a disenchanted world.

Rather than Simmel's conclusions as such – my sympathies would remain with the Nietzschean argument (Rapport 1997, 2003) – I am interested in the way in which his search for a rational basis to the issue of generality, both in human society and in human science, led him from a relativist or idealist position which concluded that the general was inevitably a distortion (with its roots in necessity and in effecting certain practical consequences) to a more realist position which would seek to ground the relation between individual human beings in *empirical reality* and not merely in their *sociocultural phenomenalism*. This is a key distinction: seeking to posit generality as real and not merely as a construct – not simply a means to label and stereotype, define and process, an otherwise unknowable individuality. The generality of being part of a social class or cultural category – 'woman', 'Muslim', 'Welsh', 'baby-boomer', 'hysteric', 'cleric' – bears no necessary relation to the true between-ness that might exist among individual human beings as members of a universal species. I would wish the contingencies of the sociocultural to be overcome and for generality to be both a route to genuine knowledge of the way in which the individual instantiates the human, and a route to genuine democracy in which the individual and the liberal state share a relation of mutual identification: the individual sees himself or herself in the state, the state sees itself as an aggregation of individuals. The individual is unique and yet scientifically accommodated as an exemplar of the species: the individual is unique and yet the subject of state policies of universal recognition and attention.

In what follows I endeavour to proceed along both the above routes: to the generality of a rational human science; and to the generality of a liberal human society.

1. Generality and the Route to Human Science

The issue of generality in human science is, to repeat, how to know the unique human being – Anyone – in a general way without thereby traducing or reducing that individuality. How is the human to be seen manifesting itself in the individual in a fashion that does not detract from seeing the latter as at the same time *sui generis*?

Two ways to resolve the issue may be, first, in terms of specific *models* of the one and the whole which retains the uniqueness of the one, and second, in terms of *characteristics* of human embodiment that may speak to individuality and generality at the same time.

1(a) Modelling the One and the Whole

I am wary of certain arithmetic procedures for averaging-out difference, such as the ‘mean’, the ‘median’ and the ‘mode’, since they would have one figure stand for all: a common denominator. The average figure would seem to possess a metonymic relation to the original, different instantiations: one averages or generalizes in such a way that one figure replaces and gives on to the many. But I do not believe that individual human beings can be averaged in this way: their relationship towards one another is more metaphoric than metonymic. The move from individual to human should not be conceived of in terms of replacement or integration, I would say, but in terms of aggregation or juxtaposition. Each individual is a complete and irreducible instantiation of the human, and their rational identification as human must be achieved with their differences being treated as intrinsic to their identity.

Three viable models suggest themselves to me, based on what I call the flower, the family, and the spectrum.

The flower is a way of naming Nietzsche’s idea that the individual human being is the culmination, the florescence, of the evolution of humanity. The line of the species ends, at present, with the individual who is as responsible as any other for how it continues into the future. As the florescence of the human species the individual carries within himself or herself the entire human phylogeny and yet amounts to a unique expression, embodying the random mutation of one procreation. The individual heritage and parentage is clear, his or her placement in an evolutionary history is generally assured, and yet his or her nature is unique and non-predictable, and that of his or her progeny equally so. As a flower or flowering, the individual human being is both generalizable and unique. Nietzsche’s writings themselves serve as an analogy: they possess a German linguistic form and are imbued with stylistic expressions of literary heritage, and yet they represent a flowering of his unique individual creativity. No one else wrote Nietzsche’s oeuvre; until he had done so its progeny was impossible; even after he had done

so, its progeny remained unforeseeable. *The flower* combines a common heritage with unique current expression.

The family is a borrowing of Wittgenstein's conception of the polythetic category. At its simplest this can be given the shape: (ABC, CDE, EFG, GHI...). In slightly more complex form: (ABC, BZG, YHF, JKL, AGL...). In more complex form again: (Abc, A11, 1c@, b@3, 3£@...). Key to the polythetic category is the notion that members of the category need share no feature in common. Rather there is a set of features, a bundle of traits, shared randomly among them. There is no necessary limit or closure to these traits (no alphabet) and their particular possession and also their ordering is unique to each member, making each individual. It is, in Wittgenstein's (1978) parlance, as if each individual shared a 'family resemblance' to others in the category, the family nose here and here, the family eyes here and here, but no one family trait was shared by all, and in combination, too, the assemblage amounted to a unique embodiment. The individual is both generalizable as a family member and uniquely himself or herself. *The family* combines a common set of characteristics with unique combination of these.

The spectrum or sliding scale images a range of possibilities within which individual members find themselves while each occupies a unique position on the scale. Human beings may, then, need a certain daily calorific intake to survive: too little or too much proves fatal. Certain substances, moreover, may be absolutely excluded from supplying this total – those that are too stony, say, or too prickly or otherwise toxic to the human constitution. Within this range, however, individuals may be unique regarding their optimum calorific intake and their favourite dietary items and meals. Anyone is recognisably human in terms of the spectrum between whose poles life is sustainable and yet irreducibly themselves in the expression which human life achieves in them. The spectrum combines a common range of possibilities with unique actual location.

Each of these – flower, family, spectrum – allows me to model a universal relationship between individual and totality. I can rationally apply them to real situations while still being assured that the generalities they deliver do not negate my also affording testimony to the uniqueness of the individual case.

The models work together, as should become clear when I consider one expression of the human in more detail: the body.

1(b) Bodily Characteristics as Individual and General

There is a universality to human embodiment. One can say that the capacities of the individual body, its capabilities and liabilities –in a word, its nature – exhibit a generality.

One can assert, for instance, that all individual human bodies possess *a distinct materiality* as living organisms. All have boundaries and componential clusters of cells. The constituents of one body cannot be at the same time those of another

(though they might be over time). Yet, this characteristic of organic differentiation is at the same time shared. There is a human generality to our individual materiality: the relationship is a family one, and also a flowering, the culmination of one material history. Then again, all individual human bodies, as material things, possess *a distinct spatiality*. The space that is occupied by one cannot at the same time be occupied by another. And this property is common, reciprocal: we are alike as human beings in needing to occupy a space, at any one time, that is uniquely our own. Yet, while the dimensions of own personal bodily space will be unique to each of us, there is a human generality to be found in the fact that the living individual organism requires an irreducible space of its own. Here is also a family relationship, and a spectral one, the spatiality of each of us having elements – cells, noses, sexual organs – whose arrangement is unique within a human range.

Related to this is the fact that all individual human bodies, as independent organisms, possess *a distinct temporality*. The time and the timing of no two lives is identical – the developmental processes, the longevity – and each must occupy its own temporal dimension and no other. But again this is something that we share: the uniqueness of an individual time of life is general among all human beings. There is no stopping, no reversing, no repeating, no doubling for anyone. The relationship is a flowering, and individual's temporality being derived from a species history, and also spectral, within a human range. The materiality, spatiality and temporality of the individual human life are accompanied by *an environmental range*, a spectral relationship as such, which characterizes their possible bodily workings. There are environmental conditions suited evolutionarily to the possible life-chances of the species. Within this range, however, it is not possible to generalize upon optimal positionings. The unique materiality of each body, its unique experience of attending to environmental conditions, means that the individual finds his or her own habituality and equilibrium. The range of possibilities concerning bodily functioning in environments bespeaks both a general delimitation and a wide individual variability.

Lastly, there are *capacities* of the human body that identify it as a general phenomenon. These operate as universal potentialities, albeit that in their usage or deployment or expression, in the *substantiation* of general human capacities, the universal is transformed into the individual. There is, for instance, a general capacity to imagine a human life: it is an individual substantiation of this capacity to write the plays of Shakespeare, the philosophy of Nietzsche. There is the general human capacity to feel pain and find something laughable; also, the general human capacity to sense, perceive, conceive, ideate, imagine, interpret, define, intend, wish, hope, know, recall. The human being can express himself or herself, and interpret the expressions of others. The human being can be self-conscious, reflexive, introspective, ironic; he or she can effect changes on his or her own

body and the world that lies beyond the borders of that body. The human being creates world-views, provides personal contexts to his or her life, and he or she can construe a life-project: the trajectory that his or her life should or might or will take within that world and among the others that it contains. None of this talk of capacity, however, reduces the individuality of substance that a life does actually contain. A range of factors, furthermore, may supervene upon these capacities and affect their realization: from individual intentionality to circumstantial (social, cultural, historical) circumscription, to accidental or random intervention – the genetic mutation, the car crash, the famine that subverts the capacity to reproduce. Notwithstanding, the human might be known by the general capacities which it encompasses; while the individual is known by the unique fashion in which those capacities come to imbue a life. The relationship between capacity and substance is a flowering, from phylogeny to ontogeny, and also familial, the substance of no two lives being the same however much history, society and culture may colour the set of elements – purdah, space travel, rugby football – of which they are composed.

Symbolic modelling (1(a)) and bodily characterization (1(b)) would appear to be two routes along which one can significantly advance towards establishing general truths about the human condition – authentic knowledge and moral insights – while at the same time not detracting from or threatening the integrity of the individuality in whose terms the human everywhere expresses itself in and as life. Let me turn to the social practice upon which these general truths might prove consequential.

2. Generality and the Route to Liberal Society

In formulating a ‘cosmopolitan’ version of justice, a civil treatment of all human beings in all times and places, Kant (1785/1993: 36) isolated what he termed ‘The Formula of Humanity as an End in Itself’: *‘Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means to an end, but always as an end in itself.* This is an ideal, but I would approach it by conceptualizing a liberal society as that set of legal, institutional and procedural norms which recognize individual members as things-in-themselves – the ends of whose existence is for themselves to define – and not as means by which other, typical ends are made manifest. The ‘problem’ of society, as Simmel elaborated, is recognition. Is it possible to treat the individual members of a society – for a state to know its members and for its members to know one another – except by way of the kind of distortion that he outlined? Can the generality neces-

sary for social structuration accommodate individuality except by way of stereotyping and labelling: turning individuals into types of human being, types of person, types of role-player?

The problem is also one of regulation. Society may be conceived of, indeed, as a state of regulation or intervention. The liberal society is a state that endeavours to ensure the lives of individual members are treated as ends not means: it intervenes in a rationalized fashion so as to maintain a Kantian 'kingdom of ends'. But how may individuality be legislated for?

A solution derives, perhaps, from an identification of capacities, or potentialities, as distinct from any substance. The liberal society – liberal laws and institutions – recognizes individuals on the basis of universal capacities of human consciousness. The offices of the liberal state intervene in efforts to guarantee that individuals' *capacities* for creating the substance of their lives, for determining their own ends, is afforded as much space for expression as possible. Iris Murdoch (2001) has suggested a definition for 'goodness' as abstaining from visiting one's desires upon others: the 'good society' is defined less in terms of 'doing good to others' than in 'refraining from doing others harm'. Goodness resides in a kind of space in which individuals can 'come into their own'; one cannot foresee and does not attempt to prescribe what this latter might entail in terms of the substance of a life, but one hopes to afford each an optimum of space for its expression, and to maintain that expression as a right. The problem of society – to institute arrangements which balance a kind of spatial individuality with a regulative generality – is settled by way of a guaranteeing of individuals' capacities to come into their own.

Let me reprise, however, the particular issue with which this article is most concerned. How are the offices of the liberal state to know its members and to intervene in individual lives in such a way as to recognize and to assist (and not obstruct) the fulfilment of their individuality? How does one treat that aspect of a unique temporality that is the individual only gradually approaching the mature human capacity to create self and world? How does one envisage 'the space to come into one's own' when the unique materiality that is an individual life is born of others (that of parents) and remains surrounded by others (family, friends, community) which would wish from it a special allegiance and sympathy? How does one know others' rationally, in terms of universal aspects of their individual human embodiment, when they might insist on knowing themselves (and others) in terms of non-rational ideologies and particularistic essentialisms that would subvert any universalistic conception of Anyone?

The key term is, I believe, potentiality. A liberal society is one where it is recognized that the individual embodies the human capacity to interpret truth, to determine identity, and always to become anew. The state is here, most importantly, the guarantor of the individual right to exercise the capacity to reflect and to be-

come: to become other than it is at present; to become other than *any* existing expression of the human condition; to become other than even it itself knew it might. Again, one does not deal in substances but in capacities: the offices of the state are not interested in what is created and chosen only that it is chosen and might be unchosen, recreated. If the child is that immature human being for whom choices are inevitably made by others, then state institutions are the guarantor of the immature individual's right to unchoose, to exit from parental choices and ideologies, at the point of maturity. The role of state institutionalism is further to ensure that no parental influence makes an unchoosing later impossible: the ideal is to conceptualize every moment as a possibly radical becoming, and every choice as free from extraneous conditioning. Given the unique temporality of an individual life, the ontogenetic consequence of each of us inhabiting only one, continuous biography, such free choice opening up at every moment of our lives will remain an ideal. But the criterion of state intervention can be nevertheless based on this: is this a circumstance in this individual's life whereby an unchoosing, a future exit strategy and a wholly new rechoosing, becomes less than likely given the necessary range of conditions within which human consciousness might flourish?

A liberal society, however rational its arrangements, will never represent an exact science. Can liberal laws, institutions and procedures encompass individual lives such that they remain ends in themselves: regulate and administer to lives such that any interventions treat their individuality rather than a kind of typicality? I say 'yes', where the state knows the individual as a potentiality and legislates on behalf of its members on the basis of such potentiality. The deliverances of science concerning human-individual capabilities and liabilities – the materiality, temporality, spatiality and range of individual human lives – are translated into rational policy. The individual is approached not as he or she is in terms of particular present or past substance – or the substance of any relational affiliation (family, community, ethnicity, church) – but as that being possessing the capacity always to be beyond current identifications (Rapport 2010). The procedures of the liberal state attempt to do justice to that capacity to go beyond by affording the space in which individual creativity of self and world may find expression.

Conclusion: Distortion Revisited

When your life is most real, to me you are mad (Olive Schreiner 1998: 69)

I have been concerned in this article with ways that might give a rational foundation to the generality of human individuality which is non-reductive, both for the purposes of a human science and of a liberal society. I am keen, too, to explore the different ways in which one can do justice to the paradoxical relation between the individual and the human. How to generalise across the dialectic between individual and human such that the accommodation of difference by sameness involves an authentic assessment? In our individuality we are at the same time most distant from one another (most 'mad', as Olive Schreiner put it) and most the same.

I end by reconsidering distortion, the theme with which I began. But rather than the distortions which Simmel felt were pragmatically and morally necessary in order for society and sociology to function, I approach distortion as evidence of the attempt to represent the individuality of another. Distortion arises from being true to the gratuitousness, the radical otherness (the 'madness' (Schreiner)) of another human psyche as it seems from the perspective of one's own (Rapport 2008). One cannot know that other as it is in itself and for itself. However, I would argue that it remains the duty of a human science and a human morality – as of a human art – to make the attempt, for then one seeks to do justice to this perfect (and unique) instantiation of the human, and one attests that only through the individual can one hope the better to know the species, its capabilities and liabilities, and better to provide for its fulfilment. More proximately, one recognises that any collectivity, any society, social grouping or community, is comprised of conscious individuals: 'constituted by self consciousness', as Anthony Cohen (1994: 146) phrases it, 'substantiated by the meanings which conscious selves impute to received [social-symbolic] forms'. 'If we do not do descriptive justice to individuals', Cohen concludes (1992: 229), 'it is hard to see how we could do it for societies'. Approaching the generality of the human through the particularity of the individual, and accepting the distortion as inevitable evidence of the paradox of that relationship, becomes both best scientific and moral practice.

My approach to distortion is motivated by the work of the great twentieth-century British artist, Stanley Spencer, in particular a set of paintings which he named 'The Beatitudes of Love' (1937-8). Spencer professed that these eight paintings were the ones he was the most loath to part with: 'I can do without all my paintings except these' (cited in Collis 1962: 142). The series was 'more genuine' than anything else he had completed. Here is 'Contemplation' (1938).



Oil on canvas, 91 x 61 cms, Stanley Spencer Gallery, Cookham [© The Estate of Stanley Spencer 2012. All rights reserved DACS.]

What Spencer felt he had achieved in 'The Beatitudes of Love' was to gain a true appreciation of the individual at the same time as the composition displayed a human unity and singularity. 'I have never seen any paintings that more truly reveal the individual', he wrote shortly after their completion, while yet 'each of the pictures shows the twined and unified soul of two persons' (cited in Collis 1962: 141-2). Spencer often wrote long commentaries in accompaniment of his paintings, words and paint complementing his work of self-expression. Of 'Contemplation', he writes that: 'it is of people making themselves endlessly acquainted with each other through passion and desire' (cited in Pople 1991: 387); 'the figures are engaged in contemplation of each other, as is expressed by their rapt gaze, as though they would never stop looking' (cited in Collis 1962: 141).

I cannot draw more deeply here on the philosophy behind Spencer's statements (cf. Rapport 2003: 179-211), but I would address the issue of his painterly style. The series was not well received by Spencer's British audience. Why the arresting and grotesque figuration, the apparent ugliness and deformity, and all but denuded of background? Even friends and erstwhile admirers found them 'terrible' to contemplate and refused to find that people were really like that (Bell 2001: 147). Spencer himself admitted to some 'consternation' when he first realized, on their completion, how he had departed from people's 'normal appearances' and dimensions; for it was not a deliberate affectation or the outcome of a preconceived plan. He stuck with the distortion, however, and defended it. Distortion could be seen to be intrinsic to the composition, the conveyance of the picture's meaning, he elaborated (Spencer 2001: 186-8). The distortion manifested the strength of emotion and desire, the imaginative integrity and 'spiritual intensity', the purity and clarity of vision, as he attempted artistically to express two things: his intuitive knowledge of another human being, and his knowledge of the relation that these others had to one another. Put in his own verbal idiom, his 'metaphysic of love', Spencer (2001: 165) explained that: 'distortion arises from the effort to see something in a way that will enable [me] to love it': it is the 'loving' artist who is able to begin lifting 'the barrier' to mutual comprehension whereby individuals might 'reveal themselves meaningfully' to one another. Imagine how individual passers-by in the street would appear, Spencer later recommended to a radio-interviewer, if they were stripped of their fashionable accoutrements, the stays of their status and position. His art revealed them in their reality, his representation animated by an inner awareness of identity and relationality.

In the terms of this article, here is the distortion that derives from wishing to see others for what they are. What the artist sees is a distortion of what he or she takes to be normal, ordinary, conventional, because what is being espied is the irreducible specificity of others' individual identity. But the artist, as self-conscious human being, is capable, indeed duty bound, to make the attempt. Distortion thereby expresses the 'drama' of a human composition: sameness and differ-

ence in paradoxical relation. In effecting this drama, the artist gives the world an insight into the 'reality' of human unity: certainly Spencer found the composition of individuality and totality which his paintings revealed to him 'remarkable' (cited in Collis 1962: 141).

Spencer was unable to reconcile the public to these paintings: he even hid some of them from view for fear of prosecution on grounds of pornography. He felt lonely but he did not recant: the compositions were new and unique and were revealing of a 'hoard of significant meanings to life' (Spencer, cited in Collis 1962: 142). Existing laws and conventions may seriously threaten but the 'ghastly vulgarity' of such could not touch 'the fullest extent of inspirational powers at the time of the conception of the idea', nor the insights such 'inwardness' afforded concerning human mutuality (Spencer, cited in Bell 2001: 153). Spencer's only regret, he attested (2001: 230), was that the limitations of human anatomy meant he could not 'swallow' the world whole: some 'misshaping' had to occur when an individual brought the world within his or her personal representational schema, but the attempt was necessary and worthwhile in itself. The 'failure' of distortion was itself testament to the impossibility of occupying a position other than an individual's own and the effort represented that truth.⁴

This work of Stanley Spencer may also appear an odd place for the article to conclude. My stance is rationalist: it is reason, as opposed to divine revelation or reliance on traditional authority, that can and should play a dominant role in enabling us, first, to gain knowledge of ourselves and our world and, second, to implement social arrangements for human betterment and freedom. But I also want to suppose that the general truths to which reason introduces us, universal and objective, can and should accommodate the objectivity of subjectivity: one would do justice to the absolute irreducibility of individual self-consciousness and identity. One recognizes the mix of modalities that comprise consciousness: emotion and passion, practicality and aesthetics, the narrations of hope and remembrance, alongside reason. Yet the existential truth of our individuality, our complexity, our imperfect situationality (our partiality), need not detract from our commitment to that Enlightenment project of overcoming both nescience and injustice.

While the mysterious artistry of distorted representations may seem a distance from the will to account rationally for the individual among the totality of his or her human fellows, then, I recall Popper's encouragement that no source of knowledge should be ruled out of the scientific canon at face value, and I recall the problematic with which Simmel launched his scientific study of society: how is it possible to know the individual other except as a type? In my estimation this corresponds to Stanley Spencer's project, wishing to portray the human individual, uniquely and in juxtaposition, as an authentic irreduction. His kind of distortion is preferable to Simmel's, however, because it is a general composition de-

rived not from stereotypification but from a commitment to recognizing and to treating radical individual otherness as a thing-in-itself.

One reaches the moral conclusion that seeking to represent the *substance* of another individual human other results in a worthy distortion; and one reaches the rational conclusion that seeking to accommodate rationally the *capacities* of the individual human other is a route to human science and free society.

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Notes

- ¹ A fuller treatment of my theme appears in: *Anyone, the Cosmopolitan Subject of Anthropology*, by Nigel Rapport, Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2012.

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