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On the relationship between the natural and the human sciences: Energetic sociology

DURING THE DECADES AROUND the turn of the twentieth century, the relationship between the natural and the human sciences was subject of intense negotiation. Familiar ‘revolt against positivism’ (Hughes) narratives neither explain nor accurately describe this process.¹ Typically these accounts assume a natural distinction between the natural and the human sciences. Their present configuration was merely waiting to be found. But if these distinctions are self-evident, then how could they have been a subject of conflict? Surely such accounts are either teleological or contradictory.

The case of the ‘sociologist’ Georg Simmel shows how ambiguous the relations between the natural sciences and the moral sciences were. He used scientific theories and metaphors throughout his work. Especially the concept of energy and its conservation were frequently employed by Simmel, and in a number of ways.

On a fundamental level, he believed that the law of energy conservation posed problems to common sense mind-body dualism. He argued that these problems could only be solved by introducing an altogether different concept of volition.² In different ways, Helmholtz and Wundt had used theories of the relation between the mind and soul, to draw boundaries between different domains of knowledge.³ In Simmel’s time, such theories and their implications were highly disputed.

In a neo-Kantian fashion, Simmel further contrasted physical and historically interesting processes by contrasting the conservation of energy in nature, with the change of values in our appreciation of it.⁴ These arguments too were common, as Rickert and Windelband had urged that value-interests were necessary in history, and absent in physical science.⁵ Such a contrast could then be used to draw boundaries between different ways of inquiring nature.

But ‘energy’ was also used as an analogy for money. Money functioned in modern economy as energy worked in the physical world. This was by no means a superficial analogy or metaphor. In his analysis of modern culture, Simmel urged that the connection between money and energy was in fact

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¹ H. Stuart Hughes. *Consciousness and Society. The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890–1930* (New York 1958), esp. Chapter 2 “The Decade of the 1890’s: The Revolt against Positivism”.

² G. Simmel, “Skizze einer Willenstheorie”, *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane* 9 (1896) 206–220; reproduced in: G. Simmel, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1894–1900. Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5 (Frankfurt a. Main 1992), p.130–144.

³ M.N. Wise, “On the Relation of Physical Science to History in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany”, in: L. Graham e.a. eds., *Functions and Uses of Disciplinary Histories*, Vol. 7 (1983), p. 3–34; idem, “How Do Sums Count? On the Cultural Origins of Statistical Causality”, in: L. Krüger e.a. eds., *The probabilistic revolution* (1987), p. 395–425.

⁴ G. Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes. Gesamtausgabe Band 6* (Frankfurt a. Main 1989), p. 23.

⁵ H. Rickert, “Psychophysische Causalität und psychophysischer Parallelismus”, *Philosophische Abhandlungen* (Tübingen 1900), p. 61–87, esp. P. 64; W. Windelband, *Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft. Rede zum Antritt des Rektorats der Kaiser-Wilhelm-Universität Strassburg gehalten am 1. Mai 1894* (Strassburg 1904); C. Sigwart, *Logik*, Vol. 2 (Leipzig 1911), p. 215, 545, 553–567, 647.

very profound.⁶ Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, energy and work were central concepts in both physics and industry.⁷

Finally, Simmel talked about ‘energy’ in a somewhat casual fashion when describing (mental) states of the subject. What did it mean when he spoke of ‘mental’ or ‘intellectual’ energies?⁸ In the year that the *Philosophy of Money* appeared, Sigmund Freud published the *Interpretation of Dreams* in which he used concepts as ‘mental energy’ in strikingly similar manner.⁹ Were these attempts to describe personal consciousness in a scientific way?

The presentation attempts to shed new light on the relationship between the natural and the moral sciences in Germany around the turn of the twentieth century, by looking at Simmel’s use of the concept of energy. Conversely I will also try to make more sense of Simmel’s philosophy by placing his employment of the concept of energy in the context of contemporary philosophical discourse.

⁶ G. Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes. Gesamtausgabe Band 6* (Frankfurt a. M 1989), p. 60, 593–594.

⁷ M.N. Wise, “Work and waste: Political economy and natural philosophy in 19th century Britain” (Part 1–3), *History of Science*, vol. 27 (1989), p. 263–301, 391–449; vol. 28 (1990), p. 221–261.

⁸ G. Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes* (1989), p. 243, 254.

⁹ S. Freud, “Die Traumdeutung [1900]”, in: *Gesammelte Werke, Chronologisch Geordnet*. Vol. II (London 1942), p. 106–108; Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke, Chronologisch Geordnet*. Vol. VI (London 1942), p.165.