



CHAPTER 9

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LOU SALOMÉ (1861–1937)
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LOU Salomé (1871–1937) was one of the most controversial female intellectuals of her day. Born in Russia, she was one of the most prolific women writers in Germany at the turn of the century, producing both literary works and essays on topics of religion, philosophy, gender theory, and psychoanalysis. She maintained numerous friendships with intellectuals of her time, lived an unconventional lifestyle, and had several love affairs, while she was married to Friedrich Carl Andreas (1846–1930), with whom she refused to have a sexual relationship. Among her close friends, for shorter or longer periods of time, were the philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Paul Rée (1849–1901), as well as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) and, in later years, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis. She eventually became one of Freud's first female students and the first female practitioner of psychoanalysis.¹

Salomé is best known for her novels and novellas in which she often portrays the lives of female characters, such as *Ruth* (1895), *Fenitschka* (1898), and *A Deviation (Eine Ausschweifung)*, 1898), or explores themes of religious faith and doubt, such as *The Struggle over God (Im Kampf um Gott)*, 1883) and *The Hour Without God (Die Stunde ohne Gott)*, 1921). Her work is therefore primarily the subject of literary studies, whereas her essays on philosophical topics have received little attention. Her style has often been dismissed as overly metaphorical, too complex, and not sufficiently argumentative. Nevertheless, a wealth of creative thinking, original ideas, intellectual breadth, and novelty make it worthwhile to explore her philosophical views in their own right.

¹ On Salomé's life, see Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Lebensrückblick. Grundriß einiger Lebenserinnerungen*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer (Zurich: Niehans und Insel, 1951); as well as Ursula Welsch and Michaela Wiesner, *Lou Andreas-Salomé: Vom "Lebensurgrund" zur Psychoanalyse* (Munich: Verlag Internationale Psychoanalyse, 1988); Martin Bidy, *Woman and Modernity: The (Life)Styles of Lou Andreas-Salomé* (Cornell University Press, 1991); Christiane Wieder, *Die Psychoanalytikerin Lou Andres-Salomé. Ihr Werk im Spannungsfeld zwischen Sigmund Freud und Rainer Maria Rilke* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

Influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy as well as by the *Lebensphilosophie* movement in the nineteenth century, the central terms of Salomé's philosophical oeuvre are "life," "lived experience [Erleben]" (in the sense of "living or going through something"), and "co-living [Mitleben]" (in the sense of "living with others"). Although she neither saw herself primarily as a philosopher nor held a formal position at a university, she developed her own original philosophical viewpoint over the course of her life, which is manifested in several smaller writings as well as in her most extensive systematic work, the unpublished manuscript *The God* (*Der Gott*, 1910). In addition, her focus on life also plays a central role in her feminist works, in which she spells out the conditions of human life specifically in terms of a female way of life, as most clearly in *The Human Being as a Woman* (*Der Mensch als Weib*, 1899) and *The Erotic* (*Die Erotik*, 1910).²

Her own contribution to philosophy is therefore best understood in the context of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement, which received growing attraction in the second half of the nineteenth century and which was significantly influenced by Nietzsche's naturalism and antirationalism. *Lebensphilosophie* gained prominence through the work of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), who, although still largely inspired by Kant, sought a phenomenologically richer account of the psychological and psychosomatic reality of human life and focused attention on life forces (also called drives), such as natural instincts and sexual drives.³ In her early essays, Salomé already anticipated insights of Freud's psychoanalysis, in which a theory of drives is also central, and she later became heavily involved in the study and practice of psychoanalysis.⁴ Salomé was personally acquainted with Dilthey's research assistant, Helene Stöcker.⁵ She also valued the writings of Georg Simmel (1858–1918), whom she knew personally and with whom she corresponded from her time in Berlin in the 1880s. Simmel was one of the first German sociologists and best known for his analyses of human individuality and social fragmentation. Moreover, Salomé actively engaged with the work of Henri Bergson (1859–1941), whose philosophy of life focuses on human creativity and the so-called *élan vital*.⁶ While her own position is inspired by these sources, she carves out an original philosophy of life and later expands her view in light of Freud's psychoanalysis. Thus, two main phases can be distinguished in her systematic writings: the first period, in which she develops

² Salomé's writings on women were (and still are) controversial because of their essentialist and biological assumptions about gender, and Salomé herself was not an active supporter of the women's rights movement. See section 2.

³ E.g., Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works*, ed. R. A. Makkreel and F. Rodi, vol. 1, *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985–2010).

⁴ A pivotal work in the development of Freud's drive theory, in which he conceives of drives in terms of life and death drives, is Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 18 (1920), 1–78 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953–74).

⁵ Welsch and Wiesner, *Lou Andreas-Salomé: Vom "Lebensurgrund" zur Psychoanalyse*, 133.

⁶ Salomé owned Bergson's two volumes *Matière et mémoire* and *L'évolution créatrice* in the 1912 editions. See Hans-Rüdiger Schwab, "Lebensgläubigkeit. Über Lou Andreas-Salomés nachgelassenes Manuskript 'Der Gott,'" in *Der Gott* (Taching am See: MedienEdition Welsch, 2016), 203.

her original philosophy of life, extends roughly from the beginnings of her career as a writer in the 1880s to 1910; the second period, which incorporates the insights of psychoanalysis, begins with her turn to psychoanalysis and her personal encounter with Freud in 1911 and lasts until her death in 1937.

This chapter focuses on the first period. Its goal is to elaborate her philosophy of life as a philosophical position in its own right by exploring its main features, clarifying the major influences on her position (especially the Nietzschean and Spinozist elements) and discussing it in the context of contemporary accounts of life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dilthey, Simmel, and Bergson).

Section 1 explores, in *The God* and related texts, her critique of religious experience and her positive account of life and the “faith in life,” highlighting specifically the Spinozist and Nietzschean influences on her position. Section 2 focuses on her feminist writings, especially *The Human Being as a Woman*, and examines how her philosophy of life plays out in her gender theory, according to which womanhood is understood in terms of a female way of life and development.

1 SALOMÉ’S ORIGINAL PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

1.1 A Critique of Religious Experience as Life Negating

In her unpublished manuscript *The God*, written in 1909 and completed—according to the author’s preface—on New Year’s Day 1910, Salomé offers her most comprehensive systematic study of God, religion, and life.⁷ Her original view of life derives from her analysis of religious experience and traditional belief in a transcendent God—a God who exists separate from and beyond the sensible world. In the spirit of a Nietzschean critique, she maintains that traditional faith has led to serious distortions in human experience and to the suppression of human life. Following the secular trend at the turn of the century to reinvent a representation of the divine in an impersonal and immanent way, she argues that the traditional transcendent conception of God results from a turning away from life itself and from a splitting off of life-affirming forces in human beings. On the basis of this critique, she develops her own philosophy of life, which culminates in a “*faith in life* [*Lebensglauben*]” that can be understood as an ultimate trusting devotion to life itself and the suspension of the traditional religious faith in favor of life itself (*God*, 73).

In her analysis of religious experience, Salomé follows the stages of human development from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. With this developmental

⁷ The manuscript was first published in its original German version by the publisher MedienEdition Welsch in 2016: Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Der Gott, in Einzelbände*, vol. 5, edited by Hans-Rüdiger Schwab (Taching am See: MedienEdition Welsch, 2016) (hereafter abbreviated *God*). All translations from *Der Gott* are my own.

approach, she anticipates the way psychoanalysis would later offer explanations in terms of the stages of human development. A child naturally creates a fantasy image of God as a person who is assumed to be opposed to the child's immediate reality, but also to act upon the child's life and the lives of those close to the child, such as parents and siblings. This childlike belief originally arises from an initially shocking experience of the outer—the natural and the social—world and from the fact that external, social expectations mostly run counter to the child's own desires. The child experiences a growing tendency of a separation between the inner and the outer life, which feels increasingly disturbing.⁸ Salomé characterizes the original experience of this separation of the inner and the outer as the “double character of life” (*God*, 9) or as “double experience of life [Doppelerleben]” (*God*, 13), as opposed to the “full experience of life [Voll-erleben]” (*God*, 11). At this stage, a child still has a strong sense of the original unity of life and the “wholeness of lived experience [Ganzheit des Erlebens]” (*God*, 9) but increasingly feels a “double experience,” according to which the inner and the outer behave in opposite and potentially conflicting ways.⁹

Religious faith thus originates from the human desire to restore the original unity of life, and the imaginary conception of God as a parent-like (or more precisely, father-like) figure acting in everyday life is understood as a means of reconciling the seemingly resistant external world with one's own internal world: “the nucleus and germ of every ancient religious practice” is “the reflection of parenthood, of common and therefore divine descent,” which is the “original way of incorporating the external life into the human interior” (*God*, 11). This imaginary conception, however, is only a “reality substitute” that eventually blocks the “reality of life [Lebenswirkliche]” itself (*God*, 20). A healthy human development therefore aims at replacing the imaginary substitute with the experience of life itself: only in the negation and rejection of a God who is opposed to life can human beings realize the deeper “meaning of life [Lebensinn]” and recover the truly “divine” in their own individual lives (*God*, 24; see also 33). Hence, Salomé argues for a conception of life that itself in some sense embraces the divine—an idea reminiscent of the Spinozist conception of God as identical with nature. This already indicates that Salomé's own conception of faith will be a *faith in life* itself, which consists in a radical surrender to the living reality itself in all its manifold manifestations in one's own experiences, as well as in collective experiences.¹⁰

⁸ Salomé starts her own memoirs with a chapter titled “The Experience of God.” See Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Looking Back*, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Marlowe, 1995), 1–11.

⁹ Similarly, Simmel diagnoses a characteristic “duality of being inwardly directed and of being outwardly directed, of the individual life form and the supra-individual total life to which it belongs.” Georg Simmel, “Das individuelle Gesetz. Ein Versuch über das Prinzip der Ethik,” *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* 4 (1913): 142. Simmel, however, considers this duality to be a defining characteristic of organic life par excellence and calls it the “typical tragedy of the organism” (Simmel, “Das individuelle Gesetz,” 142), whereas Salomé holds that life is unitary in itself and follows a Spinozistic monism, as I will discuss hereafter and in section 1.3.

¹⁰ In *Die Erotik*, Salomé develops a similar solution to the problem of the divisive experience of life in religious and social contexts by emphasizing the originally unifying and holistic character of life. See Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Die Erotik*, in *Die Gesellschaft: Sammlung sozialpsychologischer Monographien*, ed.

This radical turning to life itself is typically a sign of the stage of the adolescent life: “what takes place in puberty: the human being is transformed back into a vessel of the generality of life, and just then, awakens to the full consciousness of himself—this new kind of interweaving of self-contemplation and universal coherence [Allzusammenhang] characterizes youth in every dimension” (*God*, 26). The adolescent awakens to a new self-consciousness in which he perceives himself not only as someone in the process of “becoming [Werden]” and “growing [Wachsen],” but also as someone who “no longer transfer[s] his meaning [Sinn] to external symbols, [but rather] expect[s] it from himself” (*God*, 26). Given a healthy human development, an adolescent proceeds toward a “full-healthy life”—a life “in which inside and outside do not split apart for the human being in a pathological way,” but rather according to which life consists in a “living unity” (*God*, 31).

Salomé here presents us with a first account of her own view of *life*: life is a creative act of self-constitution, which consists above all in a “intellectual organization” (*God*, 29), resulting in “intellectual-creative states [geistesschöpferische Zustände]” (*God*, 32) and in “an intellectual experience of being [geistiges Seinserlebnis]” (*God*, 38). This creative act always aims at restoring an original unity—a unity that is inherent in life itself.

Salomé arrives at this positive account of life through a closer analysis of religious people who, instead of following this original intellectual organization, proceed according to opposite reasons: “[the reason] of turning away from life, of not coming to terms with it, of some rupture between self and world, where the inner experience did not stand up to the outer urge, and so a new duality split out precisely there, where in childhood it [the duality] strives to unite into the whole of life” (*God*, 29). According to Salomé’s psychological analysis of religious experience, religion arises from suffering from a split between internal and external forces and from an existential need for unity. When one practices a traditional, (mono-)theistic religion, the split, however, is not overcome by the restoration of the original unity of life, but by the projection of an external source, namely God, as a power that remedies this split and comforts humans in their suffering. According to Salomé, this projection of God is only an “illusion” that produces an even deeper duality and causes the ultimate failure to come to terms with the human conditions and to find unity again. Salomé describes the religious person as the “suffering” human being who also engages in a creative act—an act that, however, is not life-promoting. By performing religious acts and maintaining an imaginary relationship with God, that is, “the God illusion,” human beings turn away from their own lives and lose their original connection to life and its unity (*God*, 30). Religious acts thus merely create fictions that do not strengthen life’s internal forces, but actually hinder them. They are “delusional acts of idealization” through which we try to close the split between inside and outside in human consciousness, but whereby we can only fail (*God*, 59).¹¹

Martin Buber (Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt: Rütten & Loennig, 1910) (hereafter abbreviated *Die Erotik*), 5–68.

¹¹ A similar critique of religion, according to which religion produces illusions of God from the projections of human desires, is also found in Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872)—an author whom Salomé



Salomé's critique of religion bears similarities to both Spinoza's critique of theism and Nietzsche's analysis of Christianity as a life-destroying force. Like Spinoza, Salomé notes an intensifying duality between the divine and the world when people follow the belief in a transcendent God who is assumed to act as a complementary partner on the world to bring about unity and harmony in the world.¹² Spinoza famously argues that traditional theism falls prey to a dualism that is inherently inconsistent.¹³ Against Judeo-Christian theism, in particular, he objects to the plausibility that an immutable, incorporeal God can create a mutable and extended universe that is distinct from God himself. Spinoza's own metaphysical system in his *Ethics* (1677) overcomes this fundamental dualism by conceiving of God as the only unique eternal infinite substance that exists (see *Ethics* Ip14), and of both mental and bodily entities as mere modes of God (see *Ethics* IIP10–11).¹⁴ The only way to avoid such fundamental dualism is to recognize the fundamental identity of God and nature or, as Spinoza simply states it: "God, or Nature" (*Ethics* IV Preface). Spinoza argues that the "eternal and infinite being we call God, or Nature, acts from the same necessity from which he exists" (*Ethics* IV Preface) and that from God's infinite power "all things have necessarily flowed, or always followed . . . from eternity and to eternity" (*Ethics* Ip17s1). Spinoza rejects any anthropomorphizing notion of God and in particular the conception of God as an acting person. He subscribes to a mechanical account of

cites on several occasions, for instance, in her short text "Erleben," in *Philosophie: Ideal und Askese. Aufsätze und Essays*, vol. 2, ed. Hans-Rüdiger Schwab (Taching am See: MedienEdition Welsch, 2010) (hereafter abbreviated *AuEII*), 19–27, in which she develops a similar critique of traditional religion and transcendent conceptions of God, see esp. *AuEII*, 25.

¹² Salomé's philosophy is much indebted to Spinoza, whose work she began to study with her mentor Hendrik Gillot in her adolescence. See Welsch and Wiesner, *Lou Andreas-Salomé: Vom "Lebensurgrund" zur Psychoanalyse*, 26; Gisela Brinker-Gabler, *Image in Outline: Reading Lou Andreas-Salomé* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 43–46; Schwab, "Lebensgläubigkeit," 199–200. She frequently refers to Spinoza with great admiration in her writings on psychoanalysis, for example her *Freud Journal* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), and "My Thanks to Freud" (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1931). On the Spinozistic elements in her writings, see Sandra A. Wawrytko, "Lou Salomé (1861–1937)," in *Contemporary Women Philosophers, 1900–Today*, ed. Mary Ellen Waithe, vol. 4, *A History of Women Philosophers* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996), 73 and notes 33–37, and Katharina Kraus, "Salomé on Life, Religion, Self-Development, and Psychoanalysis: The Spinozistic Background," in *Spinoza in Germany: Political and Religious Thought across the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jason M. Yonover and Kristin Gjesdal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

¹³ In nineteenth-century German philosophy and literature, there was a broad reception of Spinozistic ideas, beginning specifically with Friedrich Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (Breslau: Löwe, 1785). Spinoza's monistic conception of thought and world had a lasting effect on the German idealists who drew explicitly on Spinozistic ideas; see Eckart Förster and Melamed Yitzhak, eds., *Spinoza and German Idealism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The idea of a mystical union of nature without the postulate of a personal God was very attractive to many German writers at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century; see Uwe Spörl, *Gottlose Mystik in der deutschen Literatur um die Jahrhundertwende* (Paderborn, Brill: 1997).

¹⁴ For references to Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677), see Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). I use the standard pagination with the following abbreviations: The Roman number indicates the number of the book, p (= proposition), s (= scholium).

nature according to which all changes in nature necessarily result from immutable natural laws.

Following Spinoza's monism, Salomé conceives of the divine as something that cannot be separated from the sensible world and especially from life itself. To truly live a unified life requires the "negation" of theistic beliefs so that "life can free itself to itself and to the divinity that is inherent in it" (*God*, 33). The divine for Salomé is inherent in life itself and cannot be separated from it, nor should it be assumed to transcend life.¹⁵

By recognizing that the multiplicity of individual mental and bodily processes within ourselves are expressions of one and the same coherent, unified life, Salomé approaches the idea of a divine that is the ultimate source, ground, or origin of all life, not only of the single individual or of the human species, but of life in general—an idea that Salomé explicates in the notion of *Mitleben*. Salomé, however, departs from Spinoza in her emphasis on life, which for her is not reducible to mechanical changes and to the motion of bodies. She favors a vitalist account of nature according to which nature is understood primarily as living, and even inorganic matter can be properly understood only in relation to living organisms. In this respect, her view shares similarities with the organicist positions of some German idealists, most clearly developed by Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, who conceives of nature as the origin of a self-determining subjectivity and thus as inherently organic and productive rather than as a concatenation of mechanical laws.¹⁶

Salomé follows Nietzsche in his analysis that religious people try to satisfy a certain internal need, which results from an experienced split, and just by doing so miss out on their own aliveness. Religious acts have mainly a comforting function, which takes place on an affective as well as on a rational level. More precisely, Salomé distinguishes three functions of religion: (1) the "symbolic" function of religious action as an expression of the "natural breath of life for the soul's health," (2) the consolatory function as a "healing mixture for the mentally suffering," and (3) the power-exerting function of God as the "determiner of general validity [Allgemeingeltende] and all-controlling One [Allesbeherrschende]" (*God*, 39). Each of these functions is driven by the fundamental illusion that there is a God who exists detached from the sensible world as a force acting from outside on human life and all other creatures. To escape this illusion and avoid being trapped in a religion that inhibits life, Salomé suggests that we need to refocus on the "organizing force" within us and on our own creativity (*God*, 32).

¹⁵ A nontranscendent conception of God is also found in other representatives of the philosophy of life, especially in Wilhelm Dilthey, "Das Problem der Religion" (1911), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1914–2006), 288–305. Dilthey, however, still appreciates the value of religious experience. Dilthey understands mystical experience not as a feeling of union with a transcendent God, but as a general awareness of the inner coherence of nature and of one's own embeddedness in nature; religious experience is then seen as life-affirming. See Rudolf Makkreel, "Wilhelm Dilthey," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dilthey/>.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* (1800) (Hamburg: Meiner, 2000).

Similarly, Nietzsche argues that the beliefs, moral values, and ethical commitments that we have built on faith in a Christian God have alienated us from a healthy way of life and are destined to collapse. Christian values, and especially the ascetic ideal, undermine life's natural pursuit of growth, domination, expansion, strength—in short, the natural will to power. The Christian religion tends to distract us from this essential nature of life and should therefore be replaced by a true affirmation of life and by the adoption of values that promote human flourishing.¹⁷

1.2 *Erleben* and the Failure to Live

Going beyond a critique of traditional religion, Salomé presents life as the central concept of her own positive philosophy—a concept that for her is more fundamental than the concepts of the material body or the mind: the character of the living is fundamental for explaining both physical-sensational and mental-psychological activities. Her own position has therefore similarities with the contemporary *Lebensphilosophie*.

Salomé spells out the concept of life in two ways: on the individual level, she develops a concept of *Erleben* (lived experience), according to which each individual is capable of experiencing herself as a living unity and as belonging to life as a whole.¹⁸ On the collective level, she defines the activity of *Mitleben* (co-living), according to which each individual understands herself as belonging to the collective of living beings and as being embedded in the wholeness and oneness of being (e.g., *All-Verbundenheit, Einssein-aller*). This collective thus includes not only human life, but all life, even non-organic nature as part of what is enclosed by life and perceived by living beings. By emphasizing the receptive-sensory, emotional, and intellectual-creative aspects of life, Salomé understands her position as being opposed to the overly rationalist positions of the Enlightenment, such as that of Kant (on her account) (*God*, 75). In this respect, too, her view bears similarities to the fundamental critique of Enlightenment thought, and especially of rationalist positions, that we find in Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Instead of seeing the ground of all being in reason, Salomé invokes an irrational ground of life

¹⁷ Esp. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Dieth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). On Nietzsche's account of life as the will to power, see Bernhard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life. Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 103–147; Nadeem J. Z. Hussain, “The Role of Life in the *Genealogy*,” in *The Cambridge Guide to Nietzsche's “On the Genealogy of Morality”*, ed. Simon May (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 142–169. In 1882, Salomé had several encounters and an intense intellectual exchange with Nietzsche, who was romantically interested in her (see Welsch and Wiesner, *Lou Andreas-Salomé: Vom “Lebensurgrund” zur Psychoanalyse*; Martin Biddey, *Woman and Modernity*). She was the first to write a comprehensive interpretation of Nietzsche's work, in which she first suggested a periodization of his philosophical development. See Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Friedrich Nietzsche in seinen Werken* (Vienna: Konegen, 1894).

¹⁸ Both German terms *Erfahren* (*Erfahrung*) and *Erleben* (*Erlebnis*) are usually translated as *experience*. To distinguish between them, I leave the German *Erleben* untranslated.

(*Lebensgrund* or *Urgrund*) from which all being, including physiological and intellectual activities, emerges.¹⁹ In what follows, I first examine her concept of *Erleben* in light of her critique of the Enlightenment emphasis on reason.

Following her critique of religious experience, she diagnoses a general failure to experience oneself as unified. Her critique of religion now expands into a broader critique of rationalism and finally a critique of ethics and morality. Salomé recognizes the “rule of the understanding [Verstandesherrschaft]” against the will and feeling. She conceives of the activities of the understanding in mechanistic terms, since they aim at “division, analysis, and the reduction to logical mechanisms” (*God*, 57). The task of the understanding—similar to that of religion—is to reconcile and “include inwardness in outwardness” (*God*, 57). Similarly, the understanding abstracts from the “inner life,” thus inhibiting its free development and realization, and thereby reinforcing the dichotomy between inner and outer. The rational person, like the religious person, tries to overcome this dichotomy, but can only do so through a “certain bravery of non-thinking,” the “resignation to the triviality of existence,” or a “busy efficiency,” which ultimately leads to the “banalization” and “de-internalization of life” (*God*, 59). Salomé arrives at a very broad definition of religion that includes what one may call the “faith in reason,” that is, the Enlightenment belief in reason as the ultimate source of truth and morality. All these rational attempts “to close the split of human consciousness into inside and outside,” however, are only “delusional act[s] of idealization” and hence yield only “surrogate solutions” (*God*, 59). According to Salomé’s critique, humans tend to generate “religious surrogates” in terms of social conventions, moral rules, or ethical ideals, in order to fulfill their need for primal unity (*God*, 60). Such surrogates have the same damaging effect as the God illusion: they reinforce a life-denying dualism, rather than promoting life.²⁰ The delusion of rationality just turns into the scheme of the delusion of religion (see *God*, 74): while the religious person projects the longing for life into God and thus reifies it externally, the believer in reason transfigures earthly human relations into something divine and thereby elevates morality and rational progress to indispensable principles of life—principles that, however, are equally external and alien to life as a transcendent God.

¹⁹ Salomé frequently invokes the notion of an ultimate ground of life, which she calls *Urgrund*. This idea, too, may point to her borrowing from Schelling, who introduces the term in his work *Über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (1809) (Hamburg: Meiner, 1997), 78, to denote the undifferentiated being that precedes all ground and existence, for which he also uses the term *Ungrund*. Schelling developed an influential model of the relationship between the subject and its inherent, but conceptually elusive life forces. With this model, Schelling influenced thinkers from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to Freud and beyond.

²⁰ While many Enlightenment philosophers rejected the mystical aspects of religious experience as irrational, Salomé reverses this Enlightenment critique of religion by arguing that the Enlightenment emphasis on rationality has made inaccessible the primordial unity of life that still shines through in mystical experiences and that has been notoriously misinterpreted by theistic religions. In this sense, Salomé’s Enlightenment critique bears similarities to Nietzsche’s critique of rationality as a dangerous force that undermines life in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

The only way to experience oneself as unified and whole is through what she calls “immediate lived experience [unmittelbares Erleben]” (*God*, 59). Only through this can the current processes of life be grasped as “parts of a wholeness” and life really lived in a holistic sense (*God*, 60). In using the term *Erleben*, Salomé adopts a term that was crucial for the contemporary *Lebensphilosophie*. Dilthey was the first to coin *Erleben* as a technical term to fill a gap in earlier representational and epistemological accounts of experience, which can, for example, be found in Kant’s transcendental philosophy. In his effort to do more justice to the phenomenological richness of human inner life, including its sensory, affective-emotional, and conative aspects, Dilthey refines what has been called by Kant (and others) *inner experience* (*innere Erfahrung*). Inner experience, for Kant, yields a truth-apt representation (i.e., an objective, conceptual representation) of the inner states and psychological features of the individual subject, in analogy with outer experience that yields a truth-apt representation of the external states of the world.²¹ For Dilthey, by contrast, inner and outer experience are no longer equivalent. Rather, by reconceiving of inner experience as actually lived experience (*Erleben*), he emphasizes that inner experience is primarily a mental activity and thus a real mental occurrence in time (as opposed to the representational and epistemic nature of outer experience). In contrast to the German term *Erfahren*, the term *Erleben* indicates the active engagement of the subject in making the contents of her representations a part of her own consciousness, that is, of her own inner world. Hence, rather than focusing on the resulting state of mind that is supposed to veridically represent an object, the term *Erleben* shifts emphasis to the inner event taking place within the experiencing subject, namely the *Erlebnis*. Dilthey also describes this process as a becoming-internal.²²

Salomé construes *Erleben* in active terms as an “act of life [Lebensakt]” (*God*, 60, 64, 69) or a “life process [Lebensvorgang]” (*God*, 96, 99, 132) in which we experience our feeling, willing, and thinking as an unfragmented, “uncut” wholeness of life (*God*, 69). The division of our experience into physiological stimuli and sensation, psychic experience, and abstract thinking results only from a retrospective analysis of the unified life process. In lived experiencing, passive receptivity and simple stimulus-response schemes combine with active “intellectual-creative processes” into an integrative whole (*God*, 69). More specifically, Salomé distinguishes three aspects of *Erleben* that

²¹ For an account of inner experience and its relation to outer experience, see Katharina Kraus, *Kant on Self-Knowledge and Self-Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

²² See, e.g., Wilhelm Dilthey, *Drafts for Volume II of the Introduction to the Human Sciences* (ca. 1880–1890), ed. R. A. Makkreel and F. Rodi, 243–457. Vol. 1 of *Selected Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985–2010), esp. 253. For Dilthey, it is the lived experience (*Erleben*) of which we can give an immediate expression (*Ausdruck*) and gain immediate understanding (*Verstehen*). Such understanding of our lived experience is the subject matter of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, as he argues in his *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. On Dilthey’s account of *Erleben*, see Rudolf Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Makkreel, “Wilhelm Dilthey,” and Katharina Kinzel, “Inner Experience and Articulation: Wilhelm Dilthey’s Foundational Project and the Charge of Psychologism,” *Hopos: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Philosophy of Science* 8, no. 2 (2018): 347–375.

manifest themselves only together in an integrated life process: physiological-passive receptivity, active-intellectual creativity, and what she calls “soulfulness [Seelisches],” which mediates between the passive and active aspects.²³ These distinctions show that for Salomé, psychic and physical experience are not separate phenomena or really distinct states of human beings, but complementary modes of one and the same act of life. This, again, suggests the influence of Spinoza, who likewise conceives of mind and body as two parallel modes of one and the same substance or ground. Using the examples of aesthetic experience of natural beauty and music, Salomé discusses the complementarity of mind and body in terms of the “intellectuality of sensibility [Geistigkeit ihrer Sinnlichkeit]” and the “material experience [stoffliches Erleben]” (*God*, 91). For Salomé, “all intellectual materializes” and “all material [can be also viewed] in its intellectuality” (*God*, 107).²⁴

Erleben is thus at the same time both a mode of consciousness and a mode of being (e.g., “Seinserlebnis,” *God*, 38). As a mode of being, *Erleben* can have various degrees of “fullness.” With the frequent use of superlatives such as “fullest of life [Lebensvollstes]” (*God*, 100) and “fullest of all life [Allerlebensvollste]” (*God*, 128), Salomé indicates that the primordial unity of being is achieved only in the highest degree or fullness of life. Only in immediate *Erleben* can we get a sense of the fullness of being, regain some of our wholeness in the partiality of single life events, and restore the primordial unity of life. However, not every act of lived experience provides access to this highest level of being. Rather, Salomé distinguishes different “methods of experience,” depending on the kinds of mental phenomena involved and depending on the degree of inwardness or outwardness. Death and God are understood as the “most outwardly directed methods of experience” because they most lack “inner humanity” (see *God*, 105 and 91). Like Dilthey (and in contrast to other contemporary philosophers of life), Salomé assumes that *Erleben* can be reduced neither to the level of representation, nor to purely organic-biological processes.²⁵ Life is defined primarily in terms of intellectual-creative activities; therefore

²³ This threefold distinction may reflect a traditional distinction of the scholastic-Aristotelian tradition between *anima* (passive-receptive soul), *animus* (re-active, specifically human soul), and *mens* (pure active intellect), which is still present in eighteenth-century German philosophy and which, for example, Kant refers to in his lectures on anthropology, e.g., *Anthropology Parow*, in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 25, 247 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902–), and *Anthropology Collins*, in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 25, 16.

²⁴ See, e.g., “the subjective [Erleben] . . . belongs mentally just as bodily to the nature-filled [Naturerfüllte] and nature-limited [Natur-begrenzte]” (*God*, 91). Salomé expands on this point in *Die Erotik* (see esp. 12–15). An alternative translation for “intellectual” in these quotations would be “spiritual,” following the German idealist conception of “spirit.”

²⁵ Herbert Spencer, for example, develops an evolutionary philosophy of life, closely following Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. His philosophy has been criticized as “mechanistic” by, among others, Henri Bergson, who—like Dilthey and Salomé—stresses the importance of immediate lived experience and of conscious creative life-processes; see Henri Bergson, *Matière et Mémoire. Essai sur la relation du corps à l’esprit* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1896), and Henri Bergson, *L’Évolution créatrice* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1907).

“that which is most full of life can only be accomplished in the intellect” (*God*, 100).²⁶ Salomé rejects a mechanistic conception of life and attributes any mechanistic reduction of psychic experience to a misguided analysis by the dissecting “mechanism of the understanding,” which can describe life only from the outside but not from the inside (*God*, 112; see also 107, 121, 128). The wholeness of life therefore shows itself especially in our emotionality, since our feelings gather a manifold experience into a unity and thus express “all-unity [Alleinheit]” and “all-peace [Allfrieden],” in contrast to the dissecting understanding (*God*, 85).²⁷

Yet it is a common fact that humans fail to have the kind of immediate *Erleben* that would give them access to the wholeness of their lives and that they fail to act in a truly intellectual-creative way. Human life frequently remains “in its mechanistic division, in the misery of its piecemeal nature, [and] without that supplementary confidence” that leads to fulfillment and joy (*God*, 63). This failure not only deepens the split between the inner life and the outer world from which we have suffered since childhood, but it finds its distinctive expression in, and is even the source of, our ethics, morality, and conventions, as I have shown. When we are not involved in genuinely creative acts of life, we look for goals and purposes that exist in the external world, and try to animate things from the external world in order to imitate aliveness with them. Instead of actually being creative, we adhere to the mere symbolization of life and try to create meaning by following habitual moral rules, social codes, and trained regulations. But this imitation of the inner life can only lead to the pathological externalization of life, to a meaning that has only external validity, and finally to a “shadowy unreality of our existence” that is the opposite of life (*God*, 72). Ethical principles, morals, and social conventions, like religious rituals, are hence misleading guides to a lifeless life, as it were, and not to a life in which we are truly alive, whole, and creative.

Salomé’s critical diagnosis of the human condition in her time bears strong resemblance to Nietzsche’s critique of morality. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and in his *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), for example, Nietzsche, too, puts forward a concept of life that stands in stark contrast to the prevailing morality. Similarly, he argues that the common moral values based on Christian faith and Greek rationality undermine our affirmation and enjoyment of life and therefore lead to decadence and degeneration.²⁸

In sum, for Salomé, all of human existence proceeds in three possible ways. First, the *symbolic life*: the life that does not rely on external and delusional symbolizations, but that is its own symbol, as in the moment of “the most childlike childhood, the most

²⁶ See also: “in its intellectual-creative states, life means . . . an unbreakable unity of all sensations, which otherwise, for our divided experience and contemplation, split into various opposites” (*AuEII*, 22).

²⁷ The distinction between feeling as a collection to unity and the understanding as dissecting into multiplicity can also be found, among others, in Simmel, e.g., Georg Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Otthein Rammstedt, vol. 12, 86 (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M., 1999–2015); see also Schwab, “Lebensgläubigkeit,” 232 n. 48).

²⁸ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, ed. Geuss and Speirs, and *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). For discussion, see Hussain, “The Role of Life in the *Genealogy*,” 150–157, and Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life*, 148–200.

youthful adolescence, the most powerful maturity, the most eternal age;” in other words, a life filled by moments in which we symbolically glimpse its primordial unity (*God*, 73). Second, the *pathological life*: the life that is driven by externalization and delusion, leading to “wavering confidence in life, dichotomy, struggle,” that is, the life of traditional religion, rationalist ethics, and conventional morality (*God*, 73). Third, the *divine life* or the *true life*, as it were: the life that is crafted and created by the “faith in life [Lebensglauben]” and hence by the “eternal divinity of life [Lebensgöttlichkeit]”; in this way of life, we grow beyond ourselves, become truly creative and “greater” than ourselves (*God*, 73).

In her short text “Erleben,” Salomé describes the self-transcendence of the divine life in terms of a life that has “nothing selfish [Selbstisches]” (*AuEII*, 24) any more and writes: “therein lies already unlocked, where ‘life’ wants to go, where it stretches itself: beyond the individual living being, but through [such being] itself, through its own highest enhancement in that its sensitive contact with that what affects it simultaneously releases its creative power” (*AuEII*, 22). While the idea of transcending human life as we ordinarily live it is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s (1883) quest for the *Übermensch*, Salomé herself was critical of Nietzsche’s emphasis on an ever greater individualization of the *Übermensch*.²⁹ Unlike Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, who strives for the domination of lower forms of life, Salomé complements her theory of life with a conception of *Mitleben*, which means the *living with others*: through empathic commitment to others, we first participate in the wholeness of being and develop a supraindividual way of life.

1.3 *Mitleben* and the Faith in Life

Salomé moves from her account of the immediate *Erlebnis* to an account of the *Allerlebnis* (all-experience) that transcends the individual in its singularity and aims at the totality of nature (*God*, 78, 84, 94, 96, 106). This *Allerlebnis* can only be approximated through an activity of *Mitleben* (co-living) through which we empathically relate to the lives of others. Like *Erleben*, *Mitleben* also comes in various kinds and degrees of unity.³⁰ The central goal of *Mitleben* is *all-love* (*Allliebe*), which is a “devotion to the One” and a desire to “become whole,” as Salomé describes it in this passage: “for as love finds the whole [Ganze] in the One [im Einen] (instead of the One [Eine] in the many) and as it again generates in the child the new egoistic, self-ascending world center, so its devotion to the One also has an effect on itself as a wanting to become whole” (*God*, 81). All-love transcends the human community and strives toward participation in the whole of life as the One from which everything partial follows and flows. More concretely, all-love includes both the individual’s active striving toward this wholeness and the affective appreciation of that wholeness in all concrete fellow creatures. It is thus manifested in our

²⁹ On this point, see Wawrytko, “Lou Salomé (1861–1937),” 78–79.

³⁰ A similar conception of social co-living can be found in *Die Erotik*, esp. 37–40.

loving attitude toward all kinds of living beings, not just human beings: it is “our love far beyond our equals” and equally concerns “the so much less demanding fellow creature” such as lower developed animals (*God*, 83). By pursuing all-love, we begin to transcend ourselves and move toward a supraindividual form of life through which we participate in the wholeness of being. But what exactly is the wholeness of being? Would this not include nonliving, inorganic matter? Salomé offers us the following definition of nature, which again shows the Spinozistic thrust of her position: “what we call ‘nature’ . . . becomes so many-sided, so all-sided (therefore also at the same time . . . apostrophized as ‘soulless’) because life and death are drawn into it by us,—because thereby it has become for the first time a total symbol for both [life and death] for us” (*God*, 88). Salomé argues that life and death coincide in the totality of all being. Death can be understood as belonging to the wholeness of being only in relation to the living and hence must be conceived as the opposite of life. More specifically, to perceive something as material, inorganic, or dead is only a distortion of our limited insight into the nature of being. As finite beings, we are simply unable to comprehend the whole, and because of our dissecting understanding, we tend to be concerned with the fragmented and divisible, that is, the materiality of being. Inorganic matter is then considered as a lesser degree of reality or even as an “unreality”: “the inorganic reality is, so to speak, no longer a reality at all, . . . it becomes an unreality, . . . the opposite to the living [reality]. Its divisibility, fragmentariness, the only thing we know to perceive of it, this limit of our insight, we make from now on the symbol and allegory of the inanimate in itself” (*God*, 88). Given her account of inorganic matter as the unreal aspects of the wholeness of being, and her account of death as the opposite of life and at the same time united with life in such wholeness, Salomé conceives of an even higher form of experience: the total experience (*Gesamterlebnis*) that goes even beyond the activity of *Mitleben*, since *Mitleben* can be exercised only toward living beings, but finds “its limit in the dead,” the inorganic (*God*, 90).

For Salomé, there is only one way to liberate *Mitleben* from its limitation: turning to the experience of beauty and thus to art. The activity of creating art becomes a symbol of striving for the wholeness of being; indeed, even life is to be understood—in a sense—as a work of art (*God*, 101). The created artwork, in turn, is understood as a symbol of such wholeness—a symbol that we need in order to ultimately conceive of ourselves as facets of the One and as embedded in the whole: “as a result of the experience of beauty, *Mitleben* does not stop at any boundary, it only reaches a higher, more far-reaching excitement; but as a result of the creation of art, it returns from this height and vastness to man, to him as the part of nature that can be grasped as a whole only if he comprehends himself in its thousandfoldness” (*God*, 93). Art is the only way to transcend our human limitations and symbolically ascend to the whole, to overcome the disharmonies we encounter in reality and proceed toward agreement and harmony. Art is thereby understood as the “sensualization of the intellectual [Versinnlichung des Geistigen]” (*God*, 99). Unlike the other methods of transcending the duality of experience, the religious and rational methods, the method of art is ultimately more successful because it closes, rather than widens, the gap between the inner and outer life, thus symbolically pointing

to the “fullest of life” (*God*, 100), rather than exteriorizing it.³¹ The reason for this is that a work of art, unlike the illusion of God or the illusion of rational ideals, does not itself pretend to *be* the whole, but only to symbolically, though still imperfectly, *express* the whole that is to be created only through life itself. Therefore, art does not negate or suppress the dynamic unfolding of the living creation, but enhances it: “the work of art is able to represent wholeness and perfection outwardly only because it is not something like that in itself, but in itself only a parable—a parable-like arrangement of parts, whose unity lives only from intellect to intellect, between creator and co-creator, but leaves the parts lifeless in their materiality” (*God*, 104). A work of art can be understood as a parable of wholeness in that it unites the artist and the viewer of art. They are jointly active in the co-creation of the meaning of a work of art—a meaning that can be most fully accessed through the lived experience of beauty.

The turn to aesthetic experience as the only solution to the inner contradictions experienced in life is a well-known line of argument among the German idealists. Schelling, for example, conceives of an artwork as the symbolic presentation of an infinite unity in finite form. Unlike Salomé, Schelling does not reject the necessity of rational ideals, but like Salomé, he argues that we can pursue and approach the unity that such ideals define only through the experience of beauty in artworks.³²

Salomé finally presents a broader theory of the relation of thought and life, as well as that of mind and body. This theory incorporates Spinozistic elements and yet also contains a scathing critique of rationalist conceptions of reality. In a Spinozistic vein, Salomé identifies the reality of life with the way of experiencing life. While life as such is always whole, diversity enters only at the level of experiencing such a life by a diversity of “methods of experiencing” (*God*, 105).³³ The God illusion and the conception of death are the two most externalist forms of experience. The opposition of death and life is now understood in terms of two different ways of conceiving the same reality. Viewing something as dead or recognizing dead aspects in things is seen as an improper way of conceiving due to a “viewing error” of our finite mental faculties (*God*, 125). Conceiving of reality in the proper sense is conceiving of it as living. By explaining the distinction between life and death as a matter of conceiving rather than real being, Salomé finds a plausible explanation for how death and life, inorganic and organic matter, can be understood as one and the same, or as coinciding in the same wholeness of being. That we conceive of things as inorganic or dead is particularly due to the dissecting activities of our understanding. The understanding analyzes matter into parts each of which are external to one another and conceives of it as a complex mechanism of interacting

³¹ A similar conception of art as the symbolization of the wholeness of life can be found in *Die Erotik* (see esp. 25–28).

³² In his *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Schelling develops a philosophy of art as the final keystone of his universal organon of philosophy.

³³ In Spinoza, we find an identification of *conceiving* and *being*. Similarly, diversity for Spinoza is primarily explained at the level of conception, whereas at the level of being there is only one unique substance. For an insightful account of conceiving and diversity in Spinoza, see Samuel Newlands, *Reconceiving Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

parts (see, e.g., “mechanistic partiality,” *God*, 122; “mechanistic complexity,” 123).³⁴ By contrast, the distinctive mark of organic beings is their “inner form” (*God*, 121) and their “living interiority” (*God*, 123). Given this model, we can now understand any seeming contrast as a matter of opposing ways of conceiving, rather than opposing ways of being, such as the “duality of exterior and interior, thought and feeling, matter and intellect, and so on” (*God*, 123; see also 107). The understanding cannot grasp the inner forms of life, but must necessarily decompose the “selfhood” of a living being into its “self-emptying” (*God*, 124). Salomé thus comes to the radical conclusion that “life—seen from the side of thinking—is . . . only a diversely analyzable death, a death dissolved in mortality” (*God*, 127). By contrast, the inner form and wholeness of life can only be felt through immediate *Erleben* and expressed in terms of symbols, but never thought in terms of rational concepts. The place to find truth is thus not thought, but life itself, “because all thinking can necessarily have its deepest truth only there, where it leads itself ad absurdum, containing the deepest truth as self-contradiction in itself, legitimizing its own right by solving its own conditionality in wonderful, liberating paradoxes” (*God*, 113). In contrast to the rationalist conception of a reality that can be fully explained by reason, for Salomé the pursuit of truth in thought naturally leads to absurdities and contradictions that can only be overcome by life itself.

As has become clear, Salomé advocates a gradual conception of the living, ranging from the most basic to the most developed level as follows:

Inorganic (*Anorganisch*) → Organic (*Organisch*) → Living (*Lebendig*) → Soulful
(*Seelisch*) → Intellectual (*Geistig*) → Personal (*Persönlich*) (see *God*, 117)

Accordingly, the highest level of life is *personal being*—an idea that is in fact in accordance with the traditional (Neo-)Platonic and Christian accounts. Yet Salomé characterizes personhood as a liminal concept of life that tends to transcend itself and the individuality it marks:³⁵

the more individually one comes to oneself, the more factually one departs from oneself; the more vividly one is left to one’s own devices, the more actively one is generating; the more creatively one enhances, the more creaturely one is subject to one’s own creation [desto geschöpfhafter dem Werk untertan]; the more one is separated into uniqueness, the more only wholeness remains; and finally everything

³⁴ Salomé appears to take her “mechanistic” account of the understanding to track the rationalist conception of rationality, and in particular the Kantian notion of understanding (*Verstand*). It should be noted, however, that Kant himself was critical of a mechanization of reasoning and himself held a teleological conception of the two rational faculties, the understanding and reason.

³⁵ Schelling, too, holds that the person is best understood through a boundary concept that transcends individuality, rather than through a concept that positively describes an individual. For an insightful discussion, see Thomas Buchheim, “Grundlinien von Schellings Personbegriff,” in *Alle Persönlichkeit ruht auf einem dunkeln Grunde: Schellings Philosophie der Personalität*, ed. Thomas Buchheim and Friedrich Hermanni (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag Berlin, 2004), 11–34.

that we call personality, “the highest happiness of the children of the earth,”³⁶ is already nothing more than this gratifying, creating, devout contradiction to oneself,— is nothing but a gesture beyond the personal. (*God*, 126)

In this passage, the liminal character of personhood is captured in a series of seemingly contradictory movements: persons by nature tend to become ever more individual, vivid, creative, and unique creators of their own lives, but in doing so they turn precisely to the opposite, becoming ever more separate from their individuality, generating new life (beyond their own), becoming a creature subject to their own creative acts, and finally dissolving into wholeness rather than remaining distinct individuals.

To sum up, reconciling and harmonizing the apparent contradictions we encounter in life by referring to an all-encompassing wholeness is the central theme of Salomé’s philosophy of life. Although she develops this account of life through a critical analysis of traditional theistic beliefs, her view may have more in common with certain currents of theistic and other religions than she would have been willing to admit in *The God*.³⁷ With her distinctive faith in life, Salomé remains open to a certain kind of religious experience that strives for unity and wholeness as the ultimate life-enhancing goal of human existence. Such a view can, for example, be found in the religious experience of Jewish and Christian mystics, who emphasize the bodily-soul union with the divine rather than the notion of a transcendent God. Like Salomé, they describe their encounters with the divine in erotic language and see the erotic as the highest expression of religious experience—a theme that is particularly evident in Salomé’s feminist writings, to which I now turn.

2 SALOMÉ’S FEMINISM AS A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

2.1 The Female Way of Life

Women’s fates play a major role not only in Salomé’s numerous literary works. She also wrote several theoretical works on feminist themes, for example on female eroticism in *Thoughts on the Problem of Love* (1900), *Die Erotik* (1910), and *Eros* (1922/23), and psychoanalytic studies of women, for example *The Female Type* (1914). Although she never appeared publicly as a protagonist of the women’s emancipatory movement, she championed the cause of women, their free development and emancipation, in her

³⁶ This quotation refers to Goethe’s poem cycle *Westöstlicher Divan* (1819), and is taken from the poem “Suleika.”

³⁷ In her memoir and other later works, she writes more positively about the importance of religious faith in general, including “the feeling of a deeply shared destiny with all things” and a “sense of reference” (*Looking Back*, 10–11).

writings and with her own lifestyle. What is remarkable about her approach to feminism is her characterization of the two genders as two different “ways of life” (*AuEII*, 97). In accounting for womanhood in terms of a distinct female way of life, she allows for both an ontological core definition and the possibility of a free development (*Entfaltung*) of women. Her life-theoretical approach therefore uniquely combines an essentialist theory of gender with an existentialist-developmental one, and positions itself midway between essentialism and universalism. It is noteworthy that even her own contemporary feminists dismissed Salomé’s essay *The Human Being as Woman* (1899) as “essentialist,” since she seemingly postulates an ahistorical and asocial female essence that manifests itself in empirically observable character traits and behavioral tendencies. Yet it would be a serious misunderstanding of Salomé’s intention and feminist project to reduce her conception of a female way of life to such an asocial and ahistorical essence.³⁸ Rather, Salomé conceives of an idealized female way of life (denoted by the term “Weib”), which defines, or better outlines, the potentialities for the concrete empirical life of a real woman (denoted by the term “Frau”)—potentialities that can change, progress, and develop in light of historical and social circumstances. My goal in this final section is to show that Salomé’s philosophy of life not only provides the terminological framework she draws upon in her feminist essays, but also gives her the theoretical foundation to develop an original gender theory that may still be relevant in today’s feminist discourse.

In her essay *The Human Being as Woman* (1899), Salomé examines the ontological difference between man and woman in terms of their respective ways of life on three different levels—the physiological, the psychological, and the intellectual. This approach enables her, on the one hand, to determine the “possibilities of being and living” of women and men in a gender-specific way (*AuEII*, 96) and, on the other hand, to recognize the equal value and independence of each gender-specific way of life and hence to offer a theoretical underpinning for the emancipation of women. The three levels of analysis resemble the threefold distinction in her philosophy of life—between body, mind, and what she calls soulfulness (*Seelisches*). The psychic, or soulful, level is, in both cases, the mediating level between physiological-bodily processes and intellectual-creative acts.

At the physiological level, Salomé acknowledges that the division of genders is at the “root of all life” (*AuEII*, 96), as there is a “gendered root of all existence” (*AuEII*, 103). By recourse to contemporary biological accounts of the process of human procreation, Salomé thus argues against the stereotype that women are merely passive recipients,

³⁸ For example, Hedwig Dohm (1831–1919) raises this type of criticism against Salomé’s essentialist and biological assumptions, although Dohm was otherwise a respectful reader of Salomé’s work; for discussion, see Brinker-Gabler, *Image in Outline*, 37–40. Salomé tended to side with Nietzschean feminists, who emphasized women’s nature, rather than women’s social and political rights. On the controversial reception of Salomé’s feminist work among contemporary and current feminists and for a discussion of the essentialism objection; see also Lorraine Markotic, “Andreas-Salomé and the Contemporary Essentialism Debate,” *Seminar* 36 (2000): 59–78. See also chapter 8 here.

whereas men are the active creators of new life. Rather, although physiologically there are certain characteristic differences between oocytes and sperm cells, “both independently represent the essence of the sexes involved in them” (*AuEII*, 98). Salomé thus considers both sexes as actively contributing to an equal degree to the formation of new life in a fertilized ovum.³⁹

The physiological level finds a parallel on the psychological level. From the psychological point of view, woman and man differ in their characteristic developmental movements and are considered “as two independent worlds for themselves” (*AuEII*, 102). While the woman is seen as developing organically from within, the man is characterized as moving forward and progressing linearly and therefore as exhibiting qualities of a “mechanistic, almost automatic” nature (*AuEII*, 104). Women are focused on the “inward effect,” but such effects are harder to examine than the outward pushing effects that men strive for (*AuEII*, 106). The female way of life is associated with notions such as “homeland [Heimat]” (or “being at home [heimisch sein],” *AuEII*, 96, 97, 115–118, 128), “harmony” (*AuEII*, 97, 115, 125, 128), and “unity” or intrinsic “uniformity [Einheitlichkeit]” (*AuEII*, 102, 104, 108, 119, 129). Salomé here uses terms like “home” to explain that by turning inward, women are more self-sufficient and find everything they need within themselves to be their own nurturing ground, unlike men who must strive for something external to be nourished.⁴⁰ A woman is then considered as a “total appearance [Totalerscheinung],” rather than as a set of individual traits and features (*AuEII*, 103, 107). Instead of being guided by external goals like the man, the woman leads her life “in all individual details in the living context of the whole being [Gesamtwesen]” (*AuEII*, 97; also 102) and therefore is characterized as a harmonious whole that follows her inner principles.

It is in this connection that Salomé, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, suggests that the “the maternal [Mütterliche] [is] the symbol of the feminine,” since for the woman “doing and being are much more intimately linked” than for the man (*AuEII*, 104).⁴¹ In the course of the argument, however, it becomes clear that this should not be understood to mean that women are limited to being mothers and can only find fulfillment in their motherhood. After all, Salomé herself consciously renounced becoming a mother and having biological children. Rather, this statement is to be understood as a recognition of the necessity of a maternal element in life itself. Such a maternal element, however, does not have to consist in biological motherhood, but can take on manifold psychological forms, and in fact, it is not confined to those who identify as women. Rather, according

³⁹ To reflect the fact that in the German discourse in which Salomé’s participated the distinction between *sex* and *gender* was not yet made in the way we distinguish them today—both are referred to as “Geschlecht” in German—I use the term “sex” as a translation in her discussion of the biological level and the term “gender” in all other contexts.

⁴⁰ I thank Madeleine Schmitz for bringing this interpretation of these metaphors to my attention.

⁴¹ In *The God*, “motherliness” is understood as something that calls for special respect and is identified with the “organism,” as opposed to the mechanism of the understanding (*God*, 119). An extensive discussion of motherliness can be found in *Die Erotik* (40–50).

to her theory of bisexuality, masculine and feminine traits coexist in each person and the “firmed union of masculinity and femininity consists in motherliness.”⁴²

Salomé follows many contemporaries in assuming that women are inherently less differentiated, calling them the “more undifferentiated piece of nature” (*AuEII*, 119; also 101). She shares this commitment with other philosophers of life, such as Georg Simmel. While Simmel derives a lower value of female life from this assumption, Salomé, by contrast, turns this characteristic into a real advantage for women: being less differentiated means having more potentiality, having more possibilities for development and thus more “creative power [Schöpferkraft]” (*AuEII*, 101).⁴³

Similarly, on the intellectual level, the female way of life tends toward the holistic development of being. On the intellectual level, it is particularly important for Salomé that women should not follow masculine norms, because if they do, they will enter a dangerous and character-destroying competition: “therefore, the principled intellectual and practical competition with the man—this proof-production [Beweis-Erbringen] of their equal efficiency in each isolated individual occupation—is a true work of the devil, and the outward ambition that is aroused in the process, is about the deadliest quality that the woman can cultivate. The absence of this ambition is precisely her natural greatness: the certainty that there is no need for such a proof in order to feel in herself the highest self-entitlement [Selbstberechtigung] as a woman” (*AuEII*, 110). The “self-entitlement” of women derives from their gender-specific way of life and corresponding female values, not from a simulation of the male way of life and the adoption of masculine norms.⁴⁴ Hence, Salomé is willing to assert that women differ from men in their intellectual characteristics. In particular, women, according to her, can better endure, process, and harmonize contradictions, whereas men tend to focus on rational logic and struggle with the contradictions they encounter in life. For women, truth is primarily what is “life-enhancing [lebenserweckend]” rather than what is rationally provable (*AuEII*, 112). Recall that according to her philosophy of life, the truth of rational thought (i.e., the truth of the understanding) leads only to the analysis of the dead, whereas the “deepest truth” can be found only in “self-contradiction” and the paradoxical nature of life itself (*God*, 113). This radical conception of truth leaves open the question of the status of logical thinking and rationality in her philosophy. It also raises the question whether she recommends that women not engage in rational discourse, thereby exposing themselves to “the reproach of dilettantism, inconsistency, and superficiality” (*AuEII*, 111). By contrast, according to Salomé, women’s ability to harmonize contradictions leads to their distinctive “goodness and wisdom beyond all reason” (*AuEII*, 122).

⁴² “Man and Woman—Bisexuality,” *The Freud Journal of Lou Andreas-Salomé*, trans. Stanley A. Leavy (New York: Basic Books, 1964), 189. See also *Die Erotik*, 52. Her view of bisexuality was consistent with other contemporary theories, for instance, Otto Weininger’s study of bisexuality in *Geschlecht und Charakter. Eine prinzipielle Untersuchung* (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1903). For discussion, see Wawrytko, “Lou Salomé (1861–1937),” 73–75.

⁴³ On the notion of “differentiation” in the contemporary studies of evolutionary theory and on the dispute between Simmel and Salomé, see Brinker-Gabler, *Image in Outline*, 28–30.

⁴⁴ A similar point against the male norming of women is found in *Die Erotik* (51).

In her account of the intellectual qualities of women, Salomé recognizes a particularly close relationship between bodily and mental functions, as she also noted in her general philosophy of life. She writes that “abstract thoughts very easily become personal” to a woman, “not only by bringing them into relation with certain persons,” but also because the thoughts themselves seem to “rise bodily [leibhaftig] from the ground of life” and thereby first “become valuable to her” (*AuEII*, 112). Again, the Spinozistic theme of a parallelism between bodily and mental aspects of thought and experience recurs.⁴⁵

2 Becoming a Women as Unfolding (*Entfaltung*)

The goal of both genders is to respectively develop into independent, whole beings and to participate in the all-life. However, this goal is pursued in different ways. The emancipation of the woman consists exactly not in following the values and goals of men, but to bring her own developmental possibilities to maturity following her own values. Salomé describes the development (*Entfaltung*) of women as a harmonization and broadening, whereas the male development leads to specialization and individualization (see *AuEII*, 119). Therefore, the goal of women should be, first and foremost, “to bring the innermost vitality to maturity” (*AuEII*, 116). Striving toward harmonization should not mislead one into thinking that a woman has no contradictions within herself. Rather, there is a “whimsical mixture of opposites in the woman: the impression at the same time of the wild, impulsive, contradictory, and also the more harmonious, quieter, balanced; the instinctive protest against law, classification, responsibility, duty, and yet also of higher morality” (*AuEII*, 118). As the more undifferentiated piece of nature, her life and beauty is a symbol of the wholeness of life in general. Women are thus “the more primordial as well as the more perfect” (*AuEII*, 119).

Most important, there should be equal developmental opportunities for both genders: “no room for the woman’s development is therefore just as bad as no freedom of movement for the man’s development, for as he wants to be allowed to reach to whatever his faculties may aim at . . . so she must be allowed to grow in herself and be allowed to increase to an ever greater extent of being” (*AuEII*, 118). As a final motif, Salomé returns to her faith in life and the person-transcending goal of the all-life: the superpersonal way of life thus defines the highest state of being for both genders. The striving for this highest goal should not be misunderstood as a negation of one’s gender-specific way of life, but understood as the harmonization of the apparent contradictions between the

⁴⁵ See also Katharina Kraus, “The Spinozistic Background”. Lloyd has recently suggested that the Spinozist parallelism of mind and body offers an alternative to the distinction between “sex” and “gender” and thus provides an interesting feminist philosophy for overcoming dominance and difference between the genders; see Genevieve Lloyd, “Dominance and Difference. A Spinozistic Alternative to the Distinction between ‘Sex’ and ‘Gender,’” in *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*, ed. Moira Gatens (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 29–41.



two ways of life in an even higher unity.⁴⁶ It is a reconciliation of the two in the sense of a *Mitleben* with the other in harmony: “the life in the personal as well as in general, the self-assertion as well as the integration into the all-life, is unified in the genders, by virtue of their essential tendencies [Wesenstendenzen], which have differentiated themselves from the start in different ways, [and so the life] combines itself in different ways, and gives each of them its special power in life” (*AuEII*, 122). In the recognition of the specifically feminine in the pursuit of the all-life lies the true meaning of female emancipation: “for nothing can emancipate a woman so deeply and truly as the idea that she is denied by some confinement in which she is artificially kept the way to attain full commitment [Hingabe] and devotion [Andacht] to life—to find the point from which life and she herself could find their mysteriously intermingling harmony” (*AuEII*, 122). The kind of devotion to life that Salomé anticipates here is, for her, erotic in nature. The highest form of life for women is therefore found in the lived experience of erotic love—a theme that she explores in further studies, such as *Die Erotik* (1910), and that has decisively shaped her own way of life, as she describes most intimately in her memoirs: love is something “almost mystical” that “becomes the symbol of everything wonderful” (*Looking Back*, 16). “Love in its fullest sense presumes that we give ourselves to each other totally” (*Looking Back*, 16).

3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The goal of this chapter has been to reevaluate and appreciate Lou Salomé as a philosopher in her own right. I have offered a detailed analysis of her original philosophy of life and its application within her feminist theory. Life, according to Salomé, is understood in a holistic way as a totality and universal connectedness of reality that precedes all concrete experience and must already be presupposed in any theoretical discourse. In contrast to alternative biologicistic tendencies in philosophy of life, Salomé construes life in its highest form as an intellectual-creative process. The immediate lived experience (*Erleben*) first enables the participation in the whole of life and is therefore the most authentic way of life for an individual. Through co-living (*Mitleben*), we feel the omnipresent interconnectedness with others and ultimately strive to harmonize the apparent contradictions in life and to embed ourselves in the wholeness and oneness of being (e.g., *All-Verbundenheit, Einssein-aller*). By postulating a specifically feminine way of life and by emphasizing women’s specificity, she avoids both the danger of reducing women to a set of essentialist stereotypes and the danger of measuring women against a system of masculine norms in a male-dominated world. Rather, by redefining the core elements of a female way

⁴⁶ In *Die Erotik*, Salomé is more critical of the “love ideal” of harmony, characterizing it as an “exaggeration” and a “man’s ideal concept” (51). Nonetheless, at the end of her discussion, she returns to the ideas of a “superpersonal unity” and an “all-eternal selfhood” that characterize the successful union of women and men (55).

of life and exploring the many possibilities for women's self-sufficient and independent development, she makes room for a positive revaluation of women and for the recognition of their distinctive, equally valuable subjectivity. Even prior to Salomé's encounter with Freud and her work as a psychoanalyst, one can see in her thought a rich source for further reflection on human life in the context of society, religion, and gender equality.

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