

Becoming Analogical

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Gilbert Simondon. *Two Lessons on Animal and Man*. Trans. Drew S. Burk. Univocal, 2012. 88 pp.

In 2009, *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, published a special issue dedicated to “the occasion of the forthcoming publication of the English translation of Gilbert Simondon’s *L’individuation psychique et collective*” (De Boever et al. 2). In the years since, anticipation of this and other translations of Simondon’s work has continued to grow, yet none of his primary texts have been published in their complete form in English (although translations of several excerpts circulate on the Internet). The English translations of Muriel Combes’ wonderful *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (2013) and of the second two volumes of Bernard Stiegler’s *Technics and Time* (2009 and 2010), as well as the publication of *Simondon: Being and Technology* (2012), a collection assembled by the *Parrhesia* team, have no doubt greatly contributed to this anticipation. Yet there are also several “macro-academic” trends helping to prepare for a (re)discovery of Simondon which Brian Massumi describes in terms of a general reconsideration of the constructivism that dominated academic discourse in the 1990s:

[Constructivism’s] posture is that things can’t be taken as givens, rather they come to be.... What was considered to come into being was less things than new social or cultural takes on them. What is constructed are fundamentally perspectives or paradigms, and the corresponding subject positions. Within the 1990s constructivist model these were understood in terms of signifying structures or coding, typically applying models derived from linguistics and rhetoric. (21)

For Massumi, what has emerged in the wake of this dominant constructivist posture is a resurgence of concern for *things* and with this a renewal of interest in questions of ontology. New Materialism; the figure of the posthuman; the work of Friedrich Kittler, Bruno Latour, and Stiegler; Object-Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism; and Italian Autonomists’ reconceptualizations of materiality, to name just a few relevant lines of flight, all testify to the idea that the most salient questions in our current cultural moment orbit around technics and being. Simondon’s reflections on these questions in the 1950s and 60s coalesced into a radically unique ontological argument that was articulated in his major works: *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques* (1958), *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (1964), and *L’individuation*

psychique et collective (1989).

The dearth of English translations of Simondon is what makes the appearance of *Two Lessons on Animal and Man* a bit strange. This small book was never intended for publication: it is composed of two recorded lectures that served “as an introduction to an annual course of general psychology (which he taught until 1967) addressed to first year humanities students” (Chateau 7). Thus, one should not approach *Two Lessons* expecting to engage directly with Simondon’s complicated theoretical apparatus. It is, rather, a book that offers a glimpse into the way Simondon understood the historical development of a question that is central to his work: What is the human? He does not answer this question from the perspective of his own philosophy of becoming in *Two Lessons*, but he does draw a lucid map of the answers that precede him.

The overarching narrative of Simondon’s argument in *Two Lessons* is that Western philosophical reflection on the relationship between human and animal life has, from Antiquity to the present, proceeded through the dialectical movement of continuity and discontinuity. Simondon’s first lesson teaches that the ancient world tended to affirm continuity between the animal and the human, although the means by and extent to which philosophical schools did so differed greatly. For Pythagoras and Anaxagoras, Simondon writes, the human and the animal (as well as the vegetal) were similarly endowed with a “vital principle,” and “the great dividing line passes between the reign of the living and the non-living much more so than between plants, animals, and man” (*Two Lessons* 32). Socrates and Plato cordon the human from the animal in a way “which is not completely dualist, but which puts man before natural beings” (38).

Simondon’s surprisingly affectionate discussion of Aristotle, which takes up the lion’s share of his first lesson, demonstrates the originality and complexity of Aristotle’s thinking on the subject. Although Aristotle preserved the idea that reason belongs solely to man, thus ensuring a discontinuity between forms of life, he also recognized that “there exist continuities and functional equivalents within the various levels of organization between the different modes of living beings” (49-50). This is to say that animals, plants, and humans have adaptive capacities that are functionally analogous, and from this perspective, reason is just one way among others that life thrives. Bees and ants, for instance, develop protective-reproductive structures (hives) in ways that are analogous to plants’ production of seeds or bark: there exists for these forms of life an instinctual “structure of development” that does not require experiential learning. Aristotle also, however, finds analogous functions between the higher animals and the human: animals learn through experience to foresee, as Simondon puts it, “the different inconveniences of possible events” (49), and this capacity imitates the human *function* of employing reason to predict consequences, even as it is wholly different

(in Aristotle's model) in terms of the *structural* composition of the human mind.

Aristotle is crucial to Simondon's theory of individuation—primarily because he provides the fodder for Simondon's well-known attack onhylomorphism. Hylomorphism, the philosophical perspective “which regards the individual as having been created from the conjunction of a form and some matter” (Simondon, “Genesis” 297), is most associated with Aristotle's treatment of the relationship between the soul and the body; this way of thinking is Simondon's most frequent and persistent enemy. Interestingly, however, in *Two Lessons*, Simondon emphasizes Aristotle's *insight* into the analogical functions of living beings. We see here that Aristotle provides a clue to how it is possible “to know the individual through the individuation, rather than individuation through the individual” (Simondon, “Position” 5). His discussion of Aristotle is one of the few places in the book where he launches into a more recognizably “Simondonian” vocabulary:

[Y]ou can see to what extent Aristotle went in developing the notion of function, in flushing out the different vital drives of the notion of function, which allow us to align parallels between beings whose mode of existence and structure are very different, but from the point of view of life, are conceived as a chain of functioning which is nonetheless comparable. (50)

The foundation for recognizing comparability between forms of life, and thus a form of continuity, is absolutely essential to Simondon's own work. To summarize in a completely inadequate nutshell, Simondon's theory of individuation conceives of the living individual as a *process* that brings elements of a milieu into relation for some duration of time. As Muriel Combes writes, “Thus, in a general manner, we may consider individuals as beings that come into existence as so many partial solutions to so many problems of incompatibility between separate levels of being” (4). Combes explains by way of example:

A plant, for instance, establishes communication between a cosmic order (that to which the energy of light belongs) and an inframolecular order (that of mineral salts, oxygen, etc.). But the individuation of a plant does not only give birth to the plant in question. In dephasing, being always simultaneously gives birth to an individual mediating two orders of magnitude and to a milieu at the same level of being (thus the milieu of the plant will be the earth on which it is located and the immediate environment with which it interacts). (4)

We must think of the living individual as a mediating *point-de-capiton* that establishes a relation between relations in a process of ongoing individuation: the relation of relations that *is* the living individual is dynamic and perpetual because the living being

internalizes and processes elements of its milieu; the living being is thus, Simondon notes, “a theater of individuation.” Deleuze and Guattari, whose collaborative writing was deeply influenced by Simondon, provide a particularly theatrical example of living individuation in their discussion of the orchid dupe wasp, an insect that is tricked into copulating with *Cryptostylis* orchid flowers that mime female wasp sex organs:

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid’s reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome....a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. (11)

It would be a mistake to reduce Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalysis to a single source of inspiration, which is to say that the passage above should not be understood as a mere translation of Simondon’s terminology. Nevertheless, the passage allows us at once to understand how the process of individuation that Simondon describes both descends from and is set in opposition to Aristotle. Aristotle’s gesture toward replacing structural analogy (fingernail-claw, for instance) with functional analogy as the basis for a comparative study of forms of life stimulates Simondon’s philosophy of ontogenesis even as Aristotle’s hylomorphic schema operates as a counter-foundation for Simondon’s whole system of thought. The relationship between the orchid and the wasp above is, for Simondon, very much like the relationship between the clay and the mold in the production of a brick. Rereading Aristotle’s famous example, Simondon argues that the mold does not impress a form from without on a formless lump of clay. Rather, the clay “is potential for deformations; it harbors within it a positive property that allows it to be deformed, such that the mold acts as a limit imposed on these deformations” (Combes 5). This point is perhaps easier to understand in relation to the orchid and the wasp: the adaptive capacities of both of these forms of life, or what Simondon would call the “preindividual” conditions that function as a metastable potential for becoming, allow for the establishment of “communication” between the orchid and wasp that results in the individuation of a new relation (the wasp-orchid rhizome) whose potential for deformation (deterritorialization, dephasing) is limited by the milieu in which the individuation takes place (a milieu that is simultaneously created by the process of individuation).

Simondon’s second lesson addresses the antithesis of the continuity thesis put forth in Antiquity. He first summarizes the contributions of a number of Christian thinkers to the project of promoting the discontinuity of humans with all other forms of life, but his real foil is Cartesian duality. As Jean-Yves Chateau notes in his informative introduction to *Two Lessons*, Simondon’s reading “corresponds to a certain tradition

of [Descartes'] reception, which is of the greatest of consequences from the point of view of history, not in regards to philosophical doctrines but to the ideas which contributed to concept formation in psychology and even to the determination of its effective object" (18-19). In other words, there is less focus on developing a nuanced reading of Descartes in *Two Lessons* than there is on making the name Descartes stand in for a type of thinking that is capable of mistaking animals for machines (a mistake Simondon finds repeated in cybernetics). As Simondon writes,

[Descartes'] is an automatism of matter, of the *res extensa*, namely something comparable to the functioning of a machine, due to the form of its pieces. When a spider constructs its web, it acts precisely like a weaving machine (a loom). When a mole digs its molehill, it acts like a shovel, namely as a tool made to disperse with the dirt in a specific manner. (74)

Given Simondon's interest in functional analogy as the basis for a comparative study of forms of life, one might assume that he would also find some functional basis for comparing the modes of existence of animals and machines. This is to some extent true, but against Cartesian dualism, which reduces non-human living organisms to machines, Simondon "opts to look at the operations of machines by analogy to the structures and functions of organisms" (Lamarre 82).

An important implication of Simondon's rejection of dualism-substantialism and development of an "analogical" understanding of individuation is that the modes of existence of the technical and the biological come to be seen as continuous with one another. We might think of this point as a more philosophically developed version of Marshall McLuhan's twin observations that technologies are extensions of man and that man has become the "sex organ of the machine world," another orchid-wasp rhizome. In other words, what we call the human and the technical co-produce the sustaining relations of their own individuations. A substantialist reading of the relations between humans, animals, and machines prioritizes the individual, taking it as a given. For Descartes, the functional analogy between a spider and a loom begins with ontologically distinct objects (spiders and looms) and reads functional similarity backward from the assumption of this distinction. For Simondon, ontogenesis begins with pre-individual potential, the emergence of problems, and the subsequent emergence of a solution, which is understood as the individuation of a new set of relations that establish a milieu.

Simondon thus flatly rejects the analogical comparisons between animals and machines that populate Cartesian metaphysics. This rejection extends to the discourse of cybernetics, which relies on the functional identification of machines and living beings with respect to communication and control (Combes 10). Simondon resists

the analogical act which posits one term in the analogy as ontologically primary to the other because such a misuse can only end in reductionism. As Combes notes:

Yet, reading Simondon's definition of analogy, we understand precisely why he could not but think of cybernetics in terms of an imprecise use of analogy, which from the outset exposed it to the danger of reductionism: in effect, bringing together the logical structure of functioning of systems independently of the study of their concrete individuation leads purely and simply to identifying the systems studied—living, social, and so on—with automatons, capable only of adaptive behavior. (10)

Analogical thinking is the cornerstone of Simondon's theory of ontogenesis. Yet we must be careful to distinguish between structural analogy (which he calls mere resemblance), functional analogy that is heuristic or diagnostic (which Simondon associates with cybernetics), and functional analogy that recognizes co-originary and co-constitutive individuations, as in the case of the orchid and the wasp. It is, of course, only this third form of analogy that Simondon develops as the perspective through which it becomes possible to recognize processes of individuation. According to Jean-Hugues Barthélémy, "Simondon calls this analogy between geneses *that is also the operation of genesis itself*" transduction" (205). Transduction is ultimately a mental process: "the course taken by the mind on its journey of discovery" (Simondon, "Genesis" 314). However, the "possibility of using an analogical transduction in order to understand a given area of reality shows that this area is really the place where an analogical structuration has occurred" (314). Individuation thus *takes place* analogically *and* it is *grasped* analogically, which places analogy at the center of Simondon's system of thinking.

It is here that the importance of *Two Lessons* itself crystallizes from the pre-individual of Simondon's untranslated corpus. If we let Simondon's lectures illuminate for us his understanding of the history of analogical comparison between the human and the animal, we may have a much easier time discerning how his rethinking of analogy differs from those that have been dominant in the past. While we may learn very little from this book regarding how Simondon himself defines the human and the animal or about his opinions of their relative biological continuity or difference, we do learn much about the analogical "and" that both separates and connects "animal and man."

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