

Review of Gilbert Simondon's *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (1966)*

GILLES DELEUZE

The principle of individuation is highly thought of, respected, yet it seems that modern philosophy has avoided taking up the problem until now. The accomplishments of physics, of biology and psychology, have led us to relativize the principle, to attenuate it, but not to reinterpret it. This is where the force of Gilbert Simondon's thought comes into play. He sets forth a profoundly original theory of individuation, which entails an entire philosophy. Simondon begins with two critical comments: 1. Traditionally, the principle of individuation relates to an already made, fully constituted, individual. The only question regards what constitutes the individuality of such a being, that is to say what characterizes an already individuated being. Since the individual is 'placed' after individuation, the principle of individuation is 'placed' *before* the individuating operation, and consequently, above individuation itself; 2. From this point on, individuation is 'placed' everywhere; it is considered to be co-extensive with being, at least with concrete being (and even with divine being). This error is correlative to the preceding one. In truth, the individual can only be contemporaneous to his individuation, and individuation, contemporaneous to its principle: the principle must be truly genetic, not simply a principle of reflection. The individual is not only the result but the *element [milieu]* of individuation. Precisely from this perspective, individuation ceases to be co-extensive with being. It must represent a moment that is neither the first being nor the whole of being. It must be determinable, or localisable, in relation to being, within

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a movement that will take it from the pre-individual to the individual.

The preliminary condition of individuation, according to Simondon, is the existence of a metastable system. Philosophy succumbed to the preceding aporias because it failed to recognize the existence of these systems. A metastable system, essentially, entails the existence of a *disparation*¹ of at least two orders of magnitude, of two disparate scales of reality, between which there is, as of yet, no interactive communication. Therefore, it implies a fundamental *difference*, like a state of asymmetry. If it is nevertheless a system, it is only insofar as difference exists in it as *potential energy*, as a *difference of potential* distributed within certain limits. It seems to us that Simondon's perspective can be reconciled with a theory of intensive quantities, since each intensive quantity is a difference in itself. An intensive quantity comprises a difference in itself, contains factors of the type E-E', to infinity, and is first established between disparate levels, heterogeneous orders that will only enter into communication later, in extension. Like any metastable system, it is a structure (not yet a synthesis) of the heterogeneous.

The importance of Simondon's thesis is now apparent. He rigorously distinguishes singularity and individuality by discovering the preliminary condition of individuation. For the metastable, defined as *pre-individual* being, is perfectly provisioned with singularities that correspond to the existence and distribution of potentials. (Could we not make the same claim in the theory of differential equations, in which the existence and distribution of "singularities" differ in kind from the 'individual' form of the integral curves in their neighborhood?) Singular without being individual, such is the state of pre-individual being. It is difference, disparity, *disparation*. Amongst the most beautiful passages of the book are those where Simondon shows how the first moment of being, disparity, as singular moment, is effectively presupposed by all other states, whether they be of unification, of integration, of tension, of opposition, of resolution, etc. Simondon insists, particularly against

¹ *Trans. note:* In translating this text I have opted to follow the example of the translator of 'The Genesis of the Individual,' and have left the term untranslated. The word will appear in italics throughout the text. The italics are mine. Simondon's term designates the *process of emergence*, or the tension (signification) "that emerges when a process of individuation reveals the dimension through which two disparate realities together become a system" or "that by which the incompatibility within the unresolved system becomes an organizing dimension in its resolution". G. Simondon, 'The Genesis of the Individual', in J. Crary and S. Kwinter, eds, *Incorporations* (New York: Zone, 1992), pp. 310-11.

Lewin and *Gestaltentheorie*, that the idea of *disparation* is deeper than that of opposition; the idea of potential energy, richer than that of a field of forces: “The determined obstacle cannot be grasped prior to hodologic space since the perspectives overlap, because there are no dimensions in relation to which the single set could be arranged. The *fluctuatio animi* that precedes resolute action is not a hesitation between several objects, or even between several paths, but the mobile superimposition of incompatible sets, sets that are alike but nonetheless disparate”.² A world

² G. Simondon, *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 1995), p. 209. *Trans. Note:* Gilbert Simondon argues against a vulgar notion of adaptation, one that has migrated from an uncritical biology to other disciplines. Simondon claims that this notion of adaptation lacks the resources to account for ontogenesis: “Adaptation is a correlative to individuation; it is only possible through individuation. The entire biology of adaptation, upon which an important part of the philosophy of the 19th century relies and that reaches us in the form of pragmatism, implicitly presupposes the already individuated living being as given. The processes of development are set aside: it is a biology without ontogenesis”. This notion of adaptation defines the problem of the individual in the terms of an opposition of forces: “that is to say, of conflict between the forces that emanate from an individual that is oriented towards a goal, and the forces that emanate from the object (from the object for the living subject), that act as a kind of barrier (obstacle) between the subject and the object”. According to Simondon this serves to present a conception of the individual as being entirely passive in the process of his own individuation: “Thus, what is missing in topological and hodological theory is a representation of the being that considers it susceptible to operate successive individuations upon itself ... Stated in another way, according to this doctrine the couple that generates *disparation* is the world-individual relation, and not an initial duality of the individual”. Whereas, for Simondon, individuation proceeds in a more subtle manner, through a resonance of the overlapping disparities in the subject and object: “Action is not only a topological modification of the environment. It modifies, in a very delicate and refined manner, the network of subject and object itself. It is not the abstract topological distribution of objects and forces that is modified. It is, in a way that is just as total but more intimate and less radical, the incompatibilities of *disparation* that are overcome and integrated thanks to the discovery of a new dimension. The world before action is not only a world in which there is a barrier between the subject and the goal. Above all, it is a world that does not coincide with itself because it cannot be seen from a single point of view. The obstacle is seldom an object amongst other objects; generally it is only so symbolically, for the requirements of a clear and objectivizing representation. The obstacle, as it is really lived, is the plurality of ways of being present in the world. Hodologic space is already the space of a solution. It is a meaningful space that integrates diverse points of view in a systematic unity, the result of an amplification. The determined obstacle cannot be grasped before hodologic space since the perspectives overlap, because there are no dimensions in relation to which the single set could be arranged. The *fluctuatio animi* that precedes resolute action is not a

of discrete singularities that overlap, that overlap all the more in that they do not yet communicate, in that they are not yet held within an individuality: such is the first moment of being.

How will individuation proceed from this condition? The argument will be that it establishes an interactive communication between orders of disparate magnitude or reality; it actualizes potential energy or integrates singularities; it *solves the problem* posed by dispartes, by organizing a new dimension in which they come to form a single set of a superior degree (hence the depth in retinal images). The category of the 'problematic' takes on a great importance in Simondon's thought, to the point that it acquires an objective sense: in effect, it does not so much designate a provisional state of our knowledge, an indeterminate subjective concept, but a moment of being, the first pre-individual moment. In Simondon's dialectic the problematic replaces the negative. Thus, individuation is the organization of a solution, of a 'resolution' for an objectively problematic system. This resolution should be conceived in two complementary ways. On the one hand as *internal resonance*, "the most primitive mode of communication between realities of different orders" (and we believe that Simondon succeeded in making of 'internal resonance' an extremely rich philosophical concept, susceptible to all sorts of applications, even and above all in psychology, in the domain of affect). On the other hand as *information* which, in its turn, establishes a communication between two disparate levels, the one defined by a *form* already contained in the receiver, the other by the signal carried from the outside (here one comes across Simondon's worries concerning cybernetics, and an entire theory of 'signification' in its relations to the individual). In any case, individuation truly appears as the advent of a new moment of Being, the moment of *phased being*, being coupled to itself: "It is individuation that creates the phases, for the phases are only the development of being on either side of itself ... Pre-individual being is phase-less being, whereas being after individuation is phased being. Such a conception identifies, or at the very least connects, individuation

hesitation between several objects, or even between several paths, but the mobile superimposition of incompatible groups, groups that are alike but nonetheless disparate. Prior to action, the subject is firmly lodged between many worlds, between many orders. Action is the discovery of the meaning of this *disparation*, of that by which the particularities of each set are integrated in a richer, larger, set, one possessing a new dimension". G. Simondon, *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 1995), pp. 207-09. Simondon also comments that he considers Lewin's theory to be a synthesis of the German theory of form and American pragmatism.

and the becoming of being”.³

Until now we have only indicated the most general principles of the book. In detail, the analysis is organized around two centers. First, a study of the different domains of individuation; notably, the differences between physical individuation and vital individuation are the subject of a profound exposition. The regime of internal resonance appears to be different in both cases; the physical individual is content to receive information once, and reiterates an initial singularity, whereas the living being successively receives many supplies of information and adds up many singularities. Above all, physical individuation is made and prolonged at the limit of the body, crystal being an example, whereas a living being grows from both the inside and the outside, the entire contents of its inner space are in ‘topological’ contact with the contents of exterior space (on this point, Simondon writes an admirable chapter, ‘Topology and Ontogenesis’). It is surprising that Simondon did not take advantage of the works of the Child school in biology, on the gradients and the systems of resolution in the development of the egg. These works suggest the idea of an individuation by means of intensity, of an intensive field of individuation, which would surely confirm Simondon’s theses.

³ G. Simondon, *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 1995), p. 232. I am including a broader section of Simondon’s text in order to further contextualize Deleuze’s citation: “... Individuation is *the advent of a moment of being*, not the first. It is not the first, but it carries with it a certain *persistence of the pre-individual phase* ... Individuation intervenes in being as the *correlative birth of the distinct phases*, starting from what is unformed; it is omnipresent pure potential. The individual, the *result* and also the *element [milieu] of individuation*, must not be considered as one: it is only so according to a very superficial *hic et nunc*, only in relation to other beings. In effect, the individual is multiple insofar as polyphased, not because it conceals in itself a plurality of secondary individuals which are more localized and temporary, but because it is a provisional solution, a phase of becoming that will lead to new operations. The unity of the individual is the *middle and central phase of being* from which all the other phases, in a unidimensional *bipolarity*, are born and eliminated. Being after individuation is not only individuated being; it is the being that comprises individuation, the result of individuation and movement over other operations thanks to a persistence of the primitive pre-individual state. After individuation being *has a past*, and the pre-individual becomes a phase. The pre-individual is, above all, phase; it only becomes the first phase thanks to the individuation that unfolds being, that puts it out of step with itself. Since the phases are only the development of being and of themselves, on either side, individuation creates the phases ... Pre-individual being is being without phases, whereas being after individuation is phased being. This conception identifies, or at the very least, relates individuation and becoming with being”.

Doubtless this is because he does not restrict himself to the biological determination of individuation, but determines increasingly complex levels of individuation; thus there is a properly psychical individuation that arises precisely when the vital functions are not sufficient to resolve the problems posed to the living, and when a new charge of pre-individual reality is mobilized within a new problematic, within a new process of solution (cf. a very interesting theory of affect). In its turn, the psychic opens upon a “transindividual collective”.

The second center of Simondon’s analysis is now readily apparent. In a way, it is a matter of a moral view of the world. Because the fundamental idea is that the pre-individual is, and must remain, associated to the individual, as the “source of future metastable states”. *Aestheticism* is generally condemned as the act by which the individual cuts itself off from the pre-individual reality in which it is immersed, becomes affixed to a singularity, refuses to communicate, and, in a certain way, provokes a loss in information. “There is ethics to the measure that there is information, that is to say signification that overcomes a disparition in the elements of beings, making it so that what is interior is also exterior”.⁴

⁴ G. Simondon, *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 1995), p. 245. Simondon is concerned with conceiving individuation as an operation, as an operation of communication. For him the individual is not to be the only model of being, but only one of its phases. The ethical moment in Simondon’s thinking is the one which demands that being only be thought in correlation with becoming, the individual in correlation with individuation, the one through which the ontogenetic process prolongs itself. Therefore, for Simondon, the ethical event, the act, is not characterized by the mere revelation of the trace of becoming. It is characterized by the affirmation of ontogenesis, by the prolongation of its process. Perpetual ontogenesis is the model of the ethical act. Taking this into account I felt it would be useful to extend Deleuze’s citation: “Ethics is the demand that there be a signifying correlation of norms and values. To grasp the ethical in its unity is to demand that it be accompanied by ontogenesis. Ethics is the sense of individuation, the sense of the synergy of successive individuations. It is the sense of the transductivity of becoming, the sense which states that in every act there always remains enough movement to go further, and the schema which will allow it to integrate itself to other schemas. It is the sense for which the interiority of an act has a sense in the exterior. To postulate that interior sense is also an exterior one, that there are no lost islands in becoming, no regions that are eternally closed upon themselves, no absolute autarky of the moment, is to affirm that every gesture has meaning and is symbolic in relation to the whole of life and to the totality of lives. There is ethics to the measure that there is information, that is to say signification that overcomes a disparition in the elements of beings, making it so that what is interior is also exterior ... The value of an act does not depend on its capacity to be universalized, according to the norm that it implies, but upon the effective reality of its integration in a reserve

Thus *ethics* participates in a type of movement that goes from the pre-individual to the transindividual by way of individuation. (The reader is left to wonder if, in his ethics, Simondon does not re-institute the form of a Self, despite having dismissed it in his theory of disparity, or of the individual conceived as dephased and multiphased being.)

Few books, in any case, make it so insistently felt how much a philosopher can take his inspiration from what is contemporary in science and nevertheless rejoin the great classical problems by transforming them, by renewing them. The new concepts established by Gilbert Simondon seem to be extremely important; their richness and originality shock and influence the reader. What Simondon elaborates is an entire ontology, one in which Being is never One: as pre-individual, it is a metastable more-than-one, superimposed and simultaneous to itself; as individuated, it is again multiple because it is 'multiphasic', it is a "phase of becoming that will lead to new operations".

Translated by Ivan Ramirez

of actions that is its becoming".