

## On Gilbert Simondon

The principle of individuation is by all accounts a respectable, even venerable notion. Until quite recently, however, it seems modern philosophy has been wary of adopting the problem as its own. The accepted wisdom of physics, biology, and psychology has led thinkers to attenuate the principle, but not to reinterpret it. But Gilbert Simondon makes no small display of intellectual power with a profoundly original theory of individuation implying a whole philosophy. Simondon begins from two critical remarks: 1) Traditionally, the principle of individuation is modeled on a completed individual, one who is already formed. The question being asked is merely what constitutes the individuality of this being, that is to say, what characterizes an already individuated being. And because we put the individual after the individuation, in the same breath we put the principle of individuation *before* the process of becoming an individual, beyond the individuation itself. 2) From that point on, individuation is perceived to be everywhere. We make it a characteristic coextensive with being, at least with concrete being (even if it were divine). We remake all being in its image, as well as the first moment of being beyond the concept. This mistake is related to the previous one. In reality, the individual can only be contemporaneous with its individuation, and individuation, contemporaneous with the principle: the principle must be truly genetic, and not simply a principle of reflection. Also, the individual is not just a result, but an *environment* of individuation. However, on this view, individuation is no longer coextensive with being; it must represent a moment, which is neither all of being nor its first moment. We must be able to localize individuation, to determine it with respect to being, in a movement that will cause a passage from the pre-individual to the individual.

The prior condition of individuation, according to Simondon, is the existence of a metastable system. By not recognizing the existence of such systems, philosophy arrived at the two previous aporias. But what essentially defines a metastable system is the existence of a "disparation," the existence of at least two different dimensions, two disparate levels of reality, between which there is not yet any interactive communication. A metastable system thus implies a fundamental *difference*, like a state of dissymmetry. It is nonetheless a system insofar as the difference therein is like *potential energy*, like a *difference of potential* distributed within certain limits. Simondon's conception, it seems to me, can in this respect be assimilated to a theory of intensive quanta, since each intensive quantum in itself is difference. An intensive quantum includes difference within itself, contains factors of the E-E' type, *ad infinitum*, and establishes itself first and foremost between disparate levels, between heterogeneous orders that enter into communication only much later, when extended.

Like the metastable system, an intensive quantum is the structure (not yet the synthesis) of heterogeneity.

The importance of Simondon's thesis is now apparent. By discovering the prior condition of individuation, he rigorously distinguishes singularity and individuality. Indeed the metastable, defined as *pre-individual* being, is perfectly well endowed with singularities that correspond to the existence and the distribution of potentials. (Is this not the same as in the theory of differential equations, where the existence and the distribution of "singularities" are of another nature than the "individual" forms of the integral curves in their neighborhood?) Singular without being individual: that is the state of pre-individual being. It is difference, disparity, "disparation." And the finest pages in the book are those where Simondon shows how disparity, as in the first moment of being, a singular moment, is in fact presupposed by all other states, whether unification, integration, tension, opposition, resolution of oppositions, etc. Most notably, against Lewin's *Gestaltheorie*, Simondon holds that the idea of "disparation" is more profound than the idea of opposition, and the idea of potential energy more profound than the idea of a field of forces: "Prior to odo-logical space, there is an overlapping of perspectives which does not allow one to grasp the determined object, because there are no dimensions with respect to which the unique whole could be ordered; the *fluctatio animi*, which precedes any resolute action, is not a hesitation between several paths, but a mobile overlapping of incompatible wholes, almost similar, and yet disparate" (p. 233). An overlapping world of discrete singularities, which overlaps all the more given that the discrete singularities do not yet communicate, or are not yet taken up in an individuality: such is the first moment of being.

So how will individuation arise from this condition? Clearly, it must establish an interactive communication between dimensions or disparate realities; it must actualize the potential energy or integrate the singularities; it needs to *resolve the problem* which disparate realities pose, by organizing a new dimension

in which they form a unique whole at a higher level (analogous to the perception of depth that emerges from retinal images). This category of problem acquires in Simondon's thought tremendous importance insofar as the category is endowed with an objective sense: it no longer designates a provisional state of our knowledge, an undetermined subjective concept, but a moment of being, the first pre-individual moment. And in Simondon's dialectic, the problematic replaces the negative. Individuation is thus the organization of a solution, the organization of a "resolution" for a system that is objectively problematic. This resolution must be conceived in two complementary ways: on the one hand, as *internal resonance*, which is "the most primitive mode of communication between realities of different orders" (and in my opinion, Simondon has succeeded in making 'internal resonance' an extremely productive concept, open to all sorts of applications, especially in psychology, in the area of affectivity); on the other hand, as *information*, which in its turn establishes communication between two disparate levels, one of them defined by a *form* already contained in the receiver, and the other by the signal brought in from the outside (here we encounter Simondon's preoccupations with cybernetics, and a whole theory of signification in the relations of the individual). In any event, individuation appears as the advent of a new moment of Being, the moment of phase-locked being, coupled to itself: "Individuation creates the phase-locking, because the phases are but the development of being, on the one side and the other, of itself... Pre-individual being is phaseless, whereas being after individuation is phase-locked. Such a conception identifies, or at least connects the individuation and the becoming of being" (p. 276).

To this point I have indicated only the very general principles of the book. In its detail, the analysis is organized around two centers. First, a study of the different domains of individuation; in particular, the differences between physical and vital individuation receive a profound exposition. The economy of internal resonance looks different in each case; the physical individual is content to receive information only once, and reiterate an initial singularity, whereas the living being receives several contributions of information in succession and balances several singularities; and most importantly, the physical individual creates and prolongs itself to the limit of the body—for example, crystal—whereas the living being grows from the interior and the exterior, with the whole content of its interior in contact "topologically" with the content of interior space (on this point Simondon writes an admirable chapter, "topology and ontogenesis"). It may be surprising that Simondon did not avail himself of the research conducted by the Child school in the domain of biology, dealing with the gradients and resolution systems in egg development, since their work suggests the idea of individuation by intensity, an intensive field of individuation, which would confirm Simondon's theses in several respects. But certainly this is due to Simondon's desire not to restrict himself to a biological determination of the individual, but to specify increasingly complex levels. We therefore find a properly psychic individuation emerging precisely when the vital functions no longer suffice to resolve the problems encountered by the living being, and when a new dose of pre-individual reality is mobilized in a new problematic, in a new process of problem solving (cf. his very interesting theory of affectivity). In turn, the psyche opens up to a "trans-individual collective."

Now we see the second center of Simondon's analyses: his moral vision of the world. The fundamental idea is that the pre-individual, a "source of future metastable states," must remain associated with the individual. *Aestheticism* is therefore condemned as that act by which an individual cuts him or herself off from the pre-individual reality from which he or she emerged. As a result, the individual is closed in on a singularity, refusing to communicate, and provoking a loss of information. "*Ethics* exists to the extent that there is information, in other words, signification overcoming a disparation of the elements of being, such that what is interior is also exterior" (p. 297). Ethics thus follows a kind of movement running from the pre-individual to the trans-individual via individuation. (The reader may indeed ask whether, in his ethics, Simondon has not reintroduced the form of the Self which he had averted with his theory of disparity, i.e. his theory of the individual conceived as dephased and multiphased being.)

In any event, few books can impress a reader as much as this one can: it demonstrates the extent to which a philosopher can both find his inspiration in contemporary science and at the same time connect with the major problems of classical philosophy—even as he transforms and renews those problems. The new concepts established by Simondon seem to me extremely important; their wealth and originality are striking, when they're not outright inspiring. What Simondon elaborates here is a whole ontology, according to

which Being is never One. As pre-individual, being is more than one—metastable, superposed, simultaneous with itself. As individuated, it is still multiple, because it is "multiphased," "a phase of becoming that will lead to new processes."

### **Gilles Deleuze 1953-1974**

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