THE PHILOSOPHY OF SIMONDON

BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND INDIVIDUATION

PASCAL CHABOT

BLOOMSBURY

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Between Technology and Individuation

Pascal Chabot

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participation of Graeme Kirkpatrick

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Foreword

Graeme Kirkpatrick

Gilbert Simondon's philosophy is of growing interest to scholars in the English-speaking world. Pascal Chabot's book presents a clear and accessible account of Simondon's thought. This book was one of the first to be published in France at the start of the recent revival of interest in Simondon's philosophy, and it is the first monograph to appear on Simondon in English.

Simondon's fundamental concern is with technology, and he offers us a unique approach to understanding what it is and how it relates to other aspects of the human condition. His vision is profoundly subversive of commonsensical oppositions: he explores technology in relation to human invention and artifice while at the same time showing that its development has a profoundly natural, even holistic character. Drawing on cybernetics, depth psychology and historical studies, as well as philosophy, Simondon propounds a worldview that is both optimistic and critical. To grasp its potential we need a study like Chabot's, which puts his ideas into context and uses examples to show how they work.

Simondon presents an optimistic vision of technology development as a process that is, in its normal or natural unfolding, fundamentally integrative. This is what he calls 'concretization': designs combine elements to achieve a purpose, but in the process each element acquires new functions, and the overall design takes on a range that exceeds its designer's original intention. Chabot illustrates this process with numerous examples and draws the relevant contrasts with other modes of thought, such as Marxism and social

evolutionism. His account is particularly clear when it comes to showing how, through concretization, the technological individual acquires a new unity all its own, and as such is neither mere artifice nor 'natural' in the standard sense of those terms.

Simondon also anticipates the relational turn which has dominated recent sociological thought. He argues that the individual cannot be understood independently of the 'pre-individual' and that we cannot conceptualize individuals, be they humans, crystals or refrigerators, as anything other than congeries of ongoing relationships. In their pre-individuated state the impress of informational codes determines what used to be thought of as the 'form' corresponding to a species or class of beings. As humans, we are shaped in this way by a variety of codes, and in this we do not differ from rock formations or other animals.

Unlike many contemporary theorists, however, Simondon does not infer from the ubiquity of informational codes that the human is merely an instantiation of code like any other 'technical individual'. Technical objects are always at bottom born of abstract reasoning, and as such they are not the same as natural creatures. The distinction we observe here is not the one that seems to be invoked most of the time when we distinguish technical from natural entities, things from humans. The two are intertwined in their genesis and in their being, and understanding this enables us to clarify what our 'humanist prejudices' actually are before we start to shed them. Chabot's text is exemplary here in setting out the issues as Simondon understood them and in positioning his argument against the relevant background in terms of both the technical changes associated with cybernetics and other philosophies that invoke a relational ontology.

The ideas of concretization and individuation result in a uniquely technological conception of humanity and of human problems. Simondon is a philosopher of technology but it is clear that his motivation for this orientation is based on the conviction that

philosophy is, or ought to be, all about technology. There is nothing more 'natural' to humans than technical activity. Simondon combines a positive appreciation of technology as something valuable in itself with an understanding of nature that in many ways anticipates the green movement. For him, the inventor does not act against the world, but is better understood as working with elements of it to establish new kinds of coherence. The inventor-technologist is, like the artist, a seeker at the margins of society who tries to establish a different relationship to the world, alternative points of connection that can ultimately create new worlds for us to experience. For Simondon, technology has an integral aesthetic dimension, and technical action can be beautiful.

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Introduction

Philosopher, amateur technologist, and Professor of Psychology at the Sorbonne, Gilbert Simondon produced a wide-ranging and original body of work. In a time of increased specialization and compartmentalisation of knowledge within disciplines, he worked towards a global vision of the connections between technology, science, psychology and philosophy. In the tradition of the encyclopaedists of the French Enlightenment, Simondon strove to produce a concrete philosophy that could confront problems of technology and society, cultural movements, and the evolution of psychology. He developed a philosophy of the emotions and sought to understand the consequences of technological change for civilizations. Inspired as much by Ionian physiology as by cybernetics, his was a philosophy of singularities. The encyclopaedists sought to trace the circumference of the sphere that encompasses all human knowledge. For Simondon, the centre of this ever-widening sphere is philosophical wonder. Wonder at the origins of natural and technological phenomena, channelled into a systematic interrogation of the processes that engender and perpetuate them.

Simondon was born on 2 October 1924 at Saint-Etienne in France, and died in 1989. Admitted to the École Normale Supérieure in 1944, he went on to teach philosophy at the Lycée Descartes in the city of Tours, from 1948 to 1955. During his tenure at the school he substituted for the physics instructor whenever possible, and inducted his

students into the workings of the numerous machines and electronic devices which he had installed in the school's basements. In 1960, he became a professor at the University of Poitiers, where he established a psychology laboratory. In 1963, he was appointed to the Sorbonne, where he again led the psychology lab. Not all of his time, however, was devoted to libraries and laboratories. He was also the father of seven children. His entire oeuvre bears witness to an extreme sensitivity to nature and a level of erudition befitting a true Renaissance man.[1]

Simondon saw himself first and foremost as a teacher and researcher, and invested little effort into overseeing the publication of his work. The somewhat roundabout manner in which his doctoral thesis was published bears testament to this. His first book, which was to remain his best-known work, was published in 1958. *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (*On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*) was only a supplementary appendix to his doctoral thesis. His second book, *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (*The Physico-Biological Genesis of the Individual*), which constituted the first part of his primary thesis, was published in 1964 and reissued in 1995. The second part of this thesis, *L'individuation psychique et collective* (*Psychic and Collective Individuation*), did not appear until 1989, twenty-five years later.

The gaps between these dates make it clear that Simondon's work was, for decades, in a kind of 'purgatory'.[2] It was rarely cited during his lifetime, except by the sociologist Georges Friedmann and, most famously, by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. The philosophy of technology interested few in France at the time. It was a Canadian senator and specialist in mechanical engineering, Jean Le Moyne, who was the first to ask for a public interview with Simondon. The

[1] As attested to by M. Mouillaud in the *Annuaire 1990 des Anciens Élèves de l'École Normale Supérieure* (*1990 Alumni Directory of the École Normale Supérieure*), p. 3.

[2] G. Hottois, *Simondon et la philosophie de la 'culture technique'*, Brussels: De Boeck, 1993.

response to Simondon's philosophical reflections was fairly subdued. He gave only two interviews in total. The second, published in the literary magazine *Esprit* in 1983, was an appeal to 'save the technical object'.

Simondon retired from teaching in 1984, and it was not until six years later, one year after his death, that *Cahiers Philosophiques* devoted a special issue to his work. In 1991, the phenomenologist Jacques Garelli dedicated considerable space to Simondon in his book *Rhythms and Worlds*. In 1992, an English translation of some twenty pages from the introduction to his thesis on the individual appeared in a New York publication, *Incorporation*, which brought together studies of cinema, cyberculture and philosophy. The following year, Gilbert Hottois published the first book devoted solely to Simondon's work. In 1994, another special issue, this time in the journal of the *Collège International de Philosophie*, signalled Simondon's rise to philosophical notoriety. More articles on Simondon's work began to appear. In 1999, Muriel Combes published her book *Simondon. Individu et collectivité (Simondon: Individual and Collective*), subtitled *Pour une philosophie du transindividuel* (*For a trans-individual philosophy*). In 2002, some of my colleagues and I put together a volume of studies on Simondon for Éditions Vrin, and Jacques Roux published papers from a colloquium at Saint Etienne under the title *Gilbert Simondon: Une Pensée Opérative* (*Gilbert Simondon: Operational Thought*).

Why this interest after three decades of silence? What has made Simondon suddenly relevant? He brought something new to philosophy: a way of thinking about the modes of existence of individuals and objects. To speak of the 'mode of existence' of an *individual* supposes that there are also modes of existence that are not individuated. The world is more than a sum of individuals. We live in a network where the pre-individual plays a significant role. Simondon speaks also of a mode of existence of technical objects. He

means by this that the object is more than just *any thing*. The product of an invention, it is defined by its relationship with an environment that it also modifies.

This is the singularity of Simondon's philosophy. Possessing a rare capacity for detached contemplation, he moved beyond established controversies to explore truly novel territory. The period during which he wrote saw the rise of two groups with opposing attitudes towards the role of technology in modern society: the technocrats and the first ecologists. He addressed his most severe criticisms to the technocrats, whose view of technology as a commodity to be exploited for power and profit filled him with horror. His attitude towards the nascent ecology movement was more nuanced. There is, running through his philosophy, an idea of the spontaneous creativity of nature, inspired by the teachings of the Pre-Socratics. Having devoted extensive study to all manner of natural phenomena, he firmly supported the ecologists' respect for natural cycles and their devotion to the preservation of endangered species, but he rejected their antagonism towards science and technology.

Simondon's position in this debate is undeniably original. He is philosophically incapable of siding with one particular camp. The objective of his philosophy, in essence, is to establish connections between what appear to be opposing forces. His writings often evoke a sense of *coincidentia oppositorum*. He sees invention as the productive manifestation of a union of opposites. Relationships also occupy a central place in his philosophy of nature and humanity, which he described as a 'philosophy of individuation'. For Simondon, the complexity of the relations involved in this process of individuation is a source of wonder.

The centrality of relations is something that Simondon intuits, and the concept of intuition is itself a central aspect of Simondon's philosophical approach. It is at once general, of cosmic dimensions, and local, on the level of the individual. It is neither deduced from sound

principles nor constructed based on single operations. This singular intuition is unique to Simondon, although close in certain respects to Bergson and in others to Rousseau. It brings a stunning richness to his vision of the world, a sensitivity to transformations and interactions between the individual and non-individuated modes of being. The ideal that inspires Simondon's philosophy is one of harmony or, more precisely, resonance between nature, humans and human technology.

In the first part of this book, we will examine some important moments in the history of technology, as illuminated by Simondon's philosophy: The encyclopaedia of Diderot and d'Alembert, Marx and the industrial revolution, and cybernetics. We will engage with questions of progress and alienation, economy and memory.

The second part is devoted to the concept of individuation. Bricks, crystals, coral colonies, the psyche, the collective and the imagination are examples taken by Simondon to demonstrate the impact of becoming and of time on individuals.

Finally, the third part attempts to bridge the gap between individuation and technology. It poses fundamental questions: What was the influence of Jungian psychology on Simondon's thought? How should we interpret his vision of a convergence between technology and the sacred? And if there is such a thing as technological 'progress', should we conceive of a parallel moral 'progress'?