

Gilbert Simondon

Two Lessons on Animal and Man, trans. Drew S. Burk.

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It has become a commonplace that reviews of Gilbert Simondon's work begin with reference to the limited availability of translations. Indeed, it has come to constitute a standard form of lamentation that a thinker, referenced in a wide range of disciplines, remains inaccessible to so many readers. Despite the fact that a number of Simondon's lecture courses and contributions to conferences have been published and his core texts are readily available in French, little is available in English. As a consequence, interest in Simondon's work in the English speaking world has tended to be mediated through an encounter with the writings of philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, Brian Massumi, Paolo Virno, or Bernard Stiegler, or recently translated texts such as Muriel Combes' *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (2013).

Simondon cuts an interesting figure in French philosophy. A student of both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Georges Canguilhem, his interests traverse many fields, making access to his writing both challenging and difficult. He is at ease in multiple disciplinary domains, describing technical artefacts in detail, reflecting on anthropology and paleontology in Leroi-Gourhan's writings, and then examining theories of information in cybernetic discourses, whilst also working with classical sources like Aristotle and Kant. On one page, he may describe an electrical field, on another, detail the genesis of the crystal, and on another, reflect on anxiety, anguish and spirituality. In certain respects, his thinking appears profoundly systematic in its aspiration to provide a complex, comprehensive, processual account of individuation from the level of the physical to psychic and collective individuation. Indeed, Isabelle Stengers is critical of these totalizing aspirations, although arguably Simondon does not seek to equate or render homogeneous the diverse fields that he places into relation.

What then can be gained from reading this very short book, comprised of two lectures offered by Simondon to first year humanities students attending a course on General Psychology?

It is not unusual for many of a philosopher's publications to be comprised of his or her lectures (Heidegger is perhaps the most famous example of this) as philosophers often think through ideas in the classroom or a conference setting. Kant describes well the anticipated communication in a lecture hall and the way in which the full silence of an audience helped him to think. Teaching situations provides a fertile ground for thinking aloud—the presence of another, even when silent, changes the way in which ideas are formulated—and this practice interrupts the meditative solipsism involved in writing. Moreover, the precision required in order to edit and distil a philosophical argument in written form can lead to a culling of those elements seen as peripheral, such as image and anecdote, which abound in pedagogical situations. Thus, the publication of Simondon's courses supplement and enrich our understanding of his core publications.

Jean-Yves Chateau has been instrumental in drawing together and providing comprehensive introductions to a number of Simondon's interventions in the spoken word. For the reader who has struggled with the density of Simondon's *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de form et d'information*, the provision of a context for Simondon's thought is most helpful, as the reader can begin to find her way through the often anomalous ways in which Simondon uses familiar terms like 'communication' and 'information'. Collected volumes of presentations and courses such as *Imagination et invention* and *Communication et information*, still only available in French, help to flesh out the short-cuts we find in Simondon's work; they offer diagrams, drawings, maps, poetic images and rich descriptions. This way of thinking, as Chateau notes, invites comparison with the Encyclopaedist philosophers. These volumes help to situate Simondon's ideas within a philosophical tradition that is at once historical and absolutely contemporary in terms of its concerns. However, those other volumes are a good deal longer and more comprehensive than *Two Lessons on Animal and Man*.

This little book, unlike the collected volumes described above, does not, upon first glance, provide any great insight into some of the key conceptual innovations that we find in Simondon's work. It is a wonderful dance through centuries of philosophy—he traces ideas from antiquity to the seventeenth century—and is, ostensibly, an introduction, but this is not the sort of course that one might ordinarily expect to be offered to first year students, simply because it is more suggestive than detailed. Perhaps this is why it serves so well as an introduction, inviting the reader or listener to think about the relation of the animal and the human, the relation of intelligence and instinct, questioning the legitimacy of the ways in which the human (animal) and all other animals are differentiated, asking what it might mean to say that an animal thinks, and embedding this in a deeper set of reflections about the soul. Chateau argues that “[t]his historical investigation, which bears on the concept formation of contemporary psychology, is interested in showing how the determination of these concepts ... finds its origin in conceptions and debates in very ancient ideas, which Simondon traces back to the Pre-Socratic thinkers” (9). It does what a first year course should do: it invites and opens thought. It also communicates the nature of the ethical inspiration that arguably underpins Simondon's core publications. Jean-Yves Chateau provides the reader with a systematic introduction that contextualises these lectures and allows the reader to find connections with later writings.

The lectures simply present in quasi-aphoristic form brief summaries of thinkers and eras, however, these deceptively straightforward descriptions also provide different ways of framing and imagining problems and concepts in a manner that manages to remain poetic and evocative, bringing us to a greater awareness of the many ways in which the human, the animals, the vegetal, life and consciousness have been imagined. In summarising antiquity in one short paragraph, Simondon says that “It is a relatively recent idea to contrast animal and human life” (32), noting that for the Presocratics “the human soul is not considered as different in nature from the animal soul or the vegetal soul” (32). Instead of providing a comprehensive summary for the novice psychologist or philosopher, this approach stops the reader in her tracks. The primary ideas of a given philosopher may be familiar but when stated with such brevity, the effect is something like a slingshot, catalysing a desire to pursue the lines of inquiry opened up by these thinkers, thus undoing crude claims to progress that can, at times, be found in elements of the social sciences.

Simondon's primary philosophical concern is with ontogenesis. This sense that understanding the genesis of ideas matters in the field of knowledge and in concept formation is implicit through these lectures. The lectures are less dry, dense, and terse than Simondon's main publications: he sketches ideas in a way that communicates the philosophical imaginary of a given philosopher or the imaginary associated with a concept such as metempsychosis—for instance, remarking that “a man can become a bird or he can become a sea monster or he can even become a river” (35). This helps the reader to understand how contemporary understandings of the individuality of the soul or continuity of life (for example) may have emerged from more ancient origins.

What is offered is not so much an argument as a journey that allows different ideas to co-exist. Cultivating a historical sensibility is an integral element of the fabric of French philosophy, and yet can be too easily ignored by those readers who are only interested in so-called ‘new ideas’; a historical sensibility is essential for reading Simondon. Myths of progress are undone, as is the notion that ideas would necessarily be archaic or irrelevant simply because they were written centuries ago. A rather crude example of the latter kind of mentality, unfortunately informed by a student's experience of psychology, occurred in one of my classes when one of my students said, “What evidence does Martin Buber have for his philosophy of relationality?” The notion that what is newer is better and that we have witnessed progress in human thinking is undermined in this short text, which explores and questions both critically and imaginatively the foundational assumptions that underpin concept formation in psychology, revealing stories and influences that the discipline might prefer to consign to oblivion.

In the case of each thinker to whom Simondon turns, it is the detail of his observations and descriptions that allow us to read these philosophers in what will be, for many of us, an unfamiliar light. For example, to explain creation by degradation in Plato's *Timaeus*, he spends some time speaking of fingernails. “For example, man has fingernails. But fingernails are of no use to him. They are a feeble armour; it is not extraordinarily powerful to have fingernails. But by progressive degradation, we see emerge little by little the role of the claw. First for men, then women are born and find a better use of their fingernails. Then we head towards the felines...” (40) He notes the role of Socrates, Plato, and the Stoics in separating the human from nature and distinguishes this from naturalistic philosophers. Much of his interest and sympathy in these lectures lies with an Aristotle re-figured without a teleological impetus and with a dynamic conception of matter. What remains with me are the many suggestive observations and descriptions that invite us to read those philosophers whose texts he draws upon with such a generous spirit, and then to imagine differently, coming to understand how our thought has been ‘pre-framed’ or, as Bergson might say, how we have been trying to answer poorly-posed problems.

Reading this short text will not teach the reader very much about Simondon's own philosophy, although those who are familiar with his writing will find pearls that offer another lens to read other, as yet untranslated texts. These lectures invite us through the stories of philosophers to question foundational assumptions that remain un-interrogated—first and foremost, the relation of the animal and the human. Perhaps more importantly, Simondon's lectures teach us how to read texts, many of which are lesser known, generously and creatively, by attending to the rich descriptions and asides in those texts rather than focusing solely on the

main thrust of their philosophical arguments. Foucault used to speak of his philosophy as being a history of the present. Simondon's short descriptions are carefully selected to interrupt the reader's complacency and, one hopes, to teach her to read in a different way. I finish with an example of this from Simondon's reading of Malebranche. "And he has a very touching example that is theological in nature: animals cannot suffer because pain is the result of original sin, and nowhere is it said that animals ate the forbidden fruit, and as a result, animals cannot suffer, it would be an injustice towards them because they did not commit this sin. Only the human species can suffer" (77).

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