

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe, Ashley Woodward, eds.** *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. 216 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-4525-1.

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*Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology* is the first volume of essays in English dedicated to the important and influential French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (1924-89). Taken as a whole, the book serves as a thorough introduction to Simondon's imposing, highly specialized vocabulary. The brief introduction does not give a chapter outline, but confines itself to a few remarks about Simondon's life and influence, but the body of the volume is self-explanatory, dedicated to three overlapping sections: "Explications," which provides a very well-organized overview of Simondon's core philosophy; "Implications," which shows how Simondon's thought can be put to use; and "Resonances," which explores his relationship to other relevant philosophies. Ordinarily, such a description might characterize a monograph by a single author; one of the most remarkable things about this volume is that this careful, almost procedural development of Simondon's philosophy is accomplished through a collection of essays by many of the most important scholars working on Simondon today. The editors, who also function as translators for much of the volume's material, have done an extraordinary job bringing into dialogue scholars as diverse as Brian Massumi, Elizabeth Grosz, Bernard Stiegler, and Anne Sauvagnargues, as well as many younger scholars from around the world. The book concludes with an extensive glossary of terms that, together with the essays introducing both the broader and more specialized aspects of Simondon's philosophy, makes this volume a complete handbook for the student or researcher who is new to the work of Simondon.

The opening essay is not about Simondon, however,

but by him. As with so much of Simondon's work, "Technical Mentality" is previously unpublished and untranslated. It provides a sense of his style, as well as introducing the reader to his disorienting refusal to begin with distinctions between the human and the nonhuman. A student of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61) and Georges Canguilhem (1904-95), Simondon is strongly influenced by science studies and the kind of conceptual history of science that characterized Canguilhem's tenure at the Sorbonne. Given the breadth of his training, it is not surprising that he has been a key influence on the interdisciplinary work of Gilles Deleuze (1925-15) and Bernard Stiegler (b. 1952), among others. As Brian Massumi argues in the interview that follows and clarifies "Technical Mentality," Simondon's philosophy must be understood as operating on several levels at once. His description of technology, for example, extends across a range of activities from biological strategies for survival to the development of the Internet (an event that he anticipated). In each of these cases, technology and technique fall under the wider process of "individuation," a process of becoming (or more specifically, "ontogenesis") in which the potentials of an entity are realized in its construction and maintenance, whether it is living or nonliving, human or nonhuman. Beginning with this opening essay and the interpretations that follow, it becomes clear that the most challenging aspect of Simondon's philosophy is that his strong monism necessitates the reconceptualization of difference: rather than a difference *from*, we have a process of "disparation," or asymmetry between elements that requires a readjustment. This readjustment, called "transduction," is the source of change that characterizes all individuals.

While Simondon's theories of life and technology have a scope that extends beyond the disciplinary boundaries of disability studies, *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology* amply demonstrates its potential uses for considerations of disability. As the essays in this volume show, Simondon's philosophy provides the reader with tools for thinking about difference outside of normative categories. In Lennard Davis's foundational *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), he calls for a greater understanding of what he names the "disabled moment," the transitional quality of many disabilities occurring along a threshold of experience rather than adhering to stable categories of identity. Simondon's philosophy provides tools for thinking about dynamic processes of becoming that do not rely on sociological generalizations or normative points of comparison. Both the community and the individual are "metastable," which means that they are invested in a dynamic process of problem solving without arriving at an absolute point of stability. Because there are no points of arrival, only stopovers in the process of becoming in Simondon's description of the world, he offers avenues for conceptualizing what Elizabeth Grosz in her contribution calls "a multiplicity of bodily and conceptual operations" that encompasses an ethics and a politics of difference (p. 53). Most importantly, Simondon's work constitutes a theory of the micrological thresholds that characterize the specificity of experience, a micropolitics that is attentive to the "disabled moment" as a transitional becoming that all life has the potential to encounter, but which resists categorical generalizations based on norms. In this view, disability becomes an exploration of thresholds at the limit point of human life without the implication of dehumanization.

Anne Sauvanargues's essay continues these insights into Simondon's conceptualization of difference outside of the Aristotelian and Kantian notions that have dominated our understanding of nonsimilarity. Simondon's prime philosophical target is what he calls "hylomorphism," a Greek term connoting the separation of thought and matter. As Sauvanargues explains, Simondon rejects this imaginary point of bifurcation, which has also functioned socially as the point of distinction between the ideal or norm and the actual, non-normative multiplicity of material life. In the hylomorphic worldview, bodies deviate from the Aristotelian norm (or later the bell curve), and subjects stray from the Kantian normative models of behavior. Instead, Simondon's individuals come together in a dynamic process of becoming, a metastable set of relations that change even as they are reproduced. The temporary resolution that reestab-

lishes an entity's equilibrium accounts equally for the disabled body or cognition and the normate. More precisely, Simondon's philosophy is capable of paying equal attention to difference because it is founded in difference, rather than normative models. What Simondon's philosophy provides the reader is a detailed conceptual procedure for grappling with these differences without resorting to the sociological generalizations that reproduce many of these same categorical abstractions.

The essays in "Implications" build on the clear exposition of the first section ("Explications"). Treating topics as diverse as anxiety, aesthetics, and death, these essays give a strong sense for the broad applicability of Simondon's work. For the student of disability studies, Igor Krtolica's contribution, "The Question of Anxiety in Gilbert Simondon," may prove especially useful. Focusing on Simondon's technical description of anxiety, which he defines as the failure to achieve a metastable resolution to the differences that comprise the individual, Krtolica addresses the sense of pain and loss that Tobin Siebers and others have made a central issue in disability studies. Far from the existential dread that characterized twentieth-century interpretations of anxiety, Simondon's approach is pragmatic in its conception of frustration without being negative about the cost to the individuals involved. Stripped of its philosophical abstraction and placed concretely in the process of becoming an individual, this sense of anxiety might very well provide useful theoretical ground for the exploration of some experiences with learning and physical disabilities.

Equally important, Marie-Pier Boucher's contribution, "Infra-Psychic Individualization," explores Simondon's claim that technology and life are "co-emergent." For Simondon, this means that technology is not an artificial addition to, or substitution for life, but describes the very process by which life individuates and shapes a milieu for itself. This discussion has an important bearing on concepts of prosthesis, and the technology-human formats that frequently develop as a response to disabilities. Again, as with all of Simondon's work, his theory of co-emergence brings materialism and vitalism together in a nonhumanist perspective that will, in the future, prove immensely important for shucking the husk of those twentieth-century theories that have largely ignored disability.

As the final section of the book, "Resonances," demonstrates, Simondon's approach will be important for students seeking to better understand Gilles Deleuze, or the ongoing process of reinterpreting Martin Heideg-

ger (1889-1976) that has shaped many of the theoretical discussions in disability studies. From his critique of cybernetics to his effective incorporation of the natural sciences, Simondon's work feels contemporary in its concerns as they are presented in *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*. This volume joins the superlative series of books published by Edinburgh University Press that

has introduced many of the most influential philosophers (including James Williams's guides to Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard) to Anglo-American readers. *Gilbert Simondon* continues this pattern while successfully opening the way to broader considerations of Simondon's philosophy and its relation to other fields of study.

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