

Thomas Lamarre

Other Selves **Are Possible**

Gilbert Simondon. *Two Lessons on Animal and Man*. Translated by Drew S. Burk. Introduction by Jean-Yves Chateau. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2011. 88 pp. \$19.95 pbk

A central figure in French philosophy, Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation has influenced a range of French thinkers, among them Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Georges Canguilhem, Isabelle Stengers, and Bruno Latour, and may be situated alongside William James, Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, and other philosophers whose profound engagement with modern sciences led to emphasis on process and transduction that makes for an account of reality and experience very different from positivist, phenomenological, and psychoanalytic lineages of thought.

Given the dearth of translations of Gilbert Simondon's work into English, new translations are very welcome. Drew S. Burke's fine translation of Simondon's *Two Lessons on Animal and Man* constitutes an important contribution to the general effort to make the works of this major philosopher accessible in English. At the same time, it is somewhat disappointing that the first translation of Simondon's work in book format would be the text of two introductory lectures for a general psychology course addressed to first-year humanities students. What philosophers would wish their work represented by their lectures for freshmen — and not even the whole course, but only the first two lectures?

There are reasons for this situation. The tendency has been to translate excerpts from Simondon's work, which has done a disservice to his reception by disrupting the systematic nature of his thinking. In response, his estate has decided only to allow translations of works published in book format. Translations of his major philosophical works are apparently in preparation with university presses, but in the meantime, due to a resurgence of interest in Simondon in France, his course lectures are being published. For the most part, the course lectures are as voluminous as his philosophical works, with the exception of his two lectures on animal and human: they appear in a remarkably small volume. As the shortest work in book format, these two lectures presented an unusual opportunity for translation.

This is not to say that the lectures are not worth reading. On the contrary, Simondon's presentation is lucid, stimulating, and concise, reviewing the history of conceptual distinctions between human and animal and their implications for the field of psychology — in a mere fifty-seven pages. As such, despite its brevity, this book potentially offers new insights for the emerging field of animal studies, which is similarly interested in the relation between human and animal, striving to find new ways of negotiating their difference while forging new connections between fields that are commonly held apart: biology, anthropology, and psychology. Indeed, the hallmark of Simondon's philosophy of individuation is that it systemically addresses the "individuals" associated with a range of disciplines, physics, chemistry, biology, engineering, psychology, sociology, and political theory — atoms, molecules, cells, organisms, machines, psyches, groups, and collectives. Yet it addresses them from the perspective of ontogenesis, that is, the process of individuation.

In the context of reading these two undergraduate lectures, however, what proves difficult is making the connections with Simondon's philosophy of individuation. After all, he is not presenting his philosophy; he is reviewing distinctions between animal and human within Western philosophy. As such, we can at best try to tease out traces of his philosophy in the spin that he puts on his presentation of the human-animal relation. In effect, to situate these two lectures, one has to read closely, deep dig, and already know something of Simondon's philosophy.

In his introduction, Jean-Yves Chateau does an excellent job of making connections between the two lectures and Simondon's philosophy as a whole. Drawing on Simondon's *L'individu et sa g n se physico-biologique* (The individual and its physico-biological genesis), Chateau provides a precise, judicious statement of Simondon's emphasis on regimes of individuation. At the risk of needlessly repeating Chateau's discussion, but in the hope of drawing out the challenge of Simondon for readers of this small tome, I would also like to address potential connections.

Chateau makes the key point: Simondon is not interested in making a distinction between animal and human; Simondon's interest lies in the distinction between the psychical and the vital (22), or if you will, between the individuation studied through individuals within the disciplines of psychology and biology. Herein lies the challenge of Simondon's approach for animal studies, theories of the posthuman, and psychoanalytic thought. Simondon does not feel that it is enough to deconstruct, hybridize, or blur the distinction between animal and human. From the standpoint of the philosophy of individuation, such a distinction has no explanatory force to begin

with. It does not afford insight into ontogenesis. If read in light of Simondon's rejection of the animal-human distinction, the two lectures on human and animal prove more interesting, for he suggests that this distinction has already been overcome, dialectically. There has been "an evolution of scientific theory of the dialectical kind" (61). Scientific theory reestablished the continuity between animal and human posited in the Aristotelian lineage (thesis) through a reversal of its antithesis, that is, Cartesian dualism (animal as *res extensa*, human as *res cogitans*). As a result, as synthesis, "what we discover at the level of ... animal reality allows us also to think in terms of human reality, up to and including social reality...." (62).

To get a better sense of what is at stake for Simondon, we might characterize this synthesis as what Foucault called the biopolitical: governing human populations on the basis of the same set of techniques used to measure animal populations and natural distributions of species. In other words, this form of power does not act primarily on the human psyche as sovereign power does. Nor does it produce segregations in order to produce human subjectivities that are effectively self-governing, in the manner of disciplinary power. Reductively speaking, in biopolitical power, the biological or vital dispenses with the psychological or psychical. The psyche or thinking becomes a sort of "spandrel" or "free rider," to use Stephen J. Gould's evolutionary terms. It remains (or becomes) a space left over where dialectical synthesis is not complete, being by nature impossible to complete.

There is something at stake then in Simondon's response to this dialectical synthesis. To borrow from Chateau's formulation, Simondon's philosophy of individuation runs counter to the mere extension of the biological into the social, showing how "the general theoretical means at our disposal ... cannot exclude the possibility of both of them [psyche and thinking] residing in a being starting from the moment it is alive" (26-27). Because *res cogitans* or the psychical cannot be excluded from the vital, "we cannot know in advance the capabilities of a being" (27), in affective, intellectual, or social terms. Moreover, such capabilities cannot be considered in neutral terms; they imply problematics and struggle. If we cannot accept the biopolitical situation in which the biological extends into the social, we cannot simply return to the psychical by ignoring the biological either (psychoanalytic theory). Nor is it enough to deconstruct or blur the relationships between human and animal. In an era in which human capital is able to exploit feeling and thinking as "free-riders," that is, as unwaged labor, Simondon's invitation to fight for the capabilities of living bodies to determine their modes of social

interaction is timely indeed. I would thus like to suggest a title for a third, unwritten lecture by Simondon on animal and human: Other selves are possible.