Editors' Introduction: Simondon, Finally

Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe and
Ashley Woodward

Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology is the first book in English dedicated entirely to the work of this French philosopher. Although the importance of Simondon's thought for twentieth- and twenty-first-century continental philosophy is clear – his work is foundational for Gilles Deleuze and Bernard Stiegler, and resonates in the writings of other prominent thinkers, such as Jean Baudrillard, Paolo Virno, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito – relatively little attention has been paid to Simondon in the English-speaking academy. The few scholars writing about Simondon in English who have contributed to this collection – Brian Massumi, Elizabeth Grosz and Miguel de Beistegui, amongst others – are, next to some philosophers not included here (Alberto Toscano, Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers for example), the exceptions that confirm the rule.

Born in 1924, Gilbert Simondon was a doctoral student of both the French philosopher and physician Georges Canguilhem and the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. By 1958, he had finished both his main thesis, *L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et de l'information* [Individuation in Light of the Notions of Form and Information], and his supplementary thesis, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (*On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*), for the French doctoral degree. While *Du mode d'existence* was immediately published in France and quickly turned into an influential book, it would take until 1964 for the first part of Simondon's main thesis to be published. This text was later republished in 1995. The second part of the thesis, on which the forthcoming English translation *Psychic and Collective Individuation* is based,¹ was not published until 1989, the year of Simondon's death. This part was later republished in 2007. Due to a rising interest in Simondon's work in recent years, a number of other (French) volumes have begun to appear, including a collection

of texts on ‘communication and information’ and Simondon’s 1964–5 course on ‘perception’, as well as the course on ‘imagination and invention’ and the collection of texts on ‘invention and technics’. With the English translation of *Du mode d’existence* and the second part of Simondon’s thesis well under way,² the early twenty-first century interest in Simondon is taking off in the English-speaking world, and the fact that translations into German, Russian, Korean, Italian and several other languages are in progress suggests a quickly growing interest in Simondon worldwide.

This book developed out of the first English-language special journal issue – published by *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy* – dedicated entirely to this important thinker.³ The dearth of English-language criticism on Simondon is no doubt largely due to a lack of English translations of Simondon’s writings,⁴ and it was on the occasion of the forthcoming publication of the translation of Simondon’s *Psychic and Collective Individuation* and *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* that *Parrhesia* decided to put together a special issue on Simondon’s work. Several of the features, articles and interviews that were published in *Parrhesia*’s special issue are reproduced here with only minor modifications. However, this book has also been expanded significantly with several other contributions from emerging and established scholars of Simondon’s work. *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology* thus hopes to contribute further to English-language scholarship on Simondon, and function as a guide as this scholarship continues to expand.

As well as (somewhat playfully) alluding to some of the major texts of twentieth-century philosophy (by Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Alain Badiou), the subtitle of this book has been chosen to reflect the two topics central to Simondon’s philosophy: ontology and technology. Scholars have also suggested that the field of psychology and the human sciences should be added as a third area of investigation. (In fact, Simondon was elected to the chair in psychology at the Sorbonne in 1963.) Although the latter is also represented here – Marie-Pier Boucher and Dominique Lecourt’s contributions, for example, reflect on this – the book’s main areas of interest are, as its subtitle indicates, ‘being’ and ‘technology’. The notions of ontogenesis, individuation (a near-synonym for ontogenesis, as Barthélémy explains in his glossary) and technics (which is not exactly technology) are thus central to this book’s project. By gathering contributions that address all these areas of Simondon’s thought, the book ultimately hopes to stimulate reflection on how these different elements of Simondon’s philosophy fit together.

As a whole, this book aims to introduce readers to Simondon's thought, as well as pursue some of its implications for contemporary philosophy. It includes an important piece of Simondon's own work: his text 'Technical Mentality', which was published in English for the first time in *Parrhesia's* special issue. Because of the highly technical nature of Simondon's thought, as well as the intricacies of his writing, this book includes a number of contributions that help to explain Simondon to the reader ('Explications'). This first section of the book begins with an interview with Brian Massumi which aids a reading of 'Technical Mentality', while helping to locate Simondon in the contemporary theoretical scene. It then follows with an explanation of his theory of individuation and its practical import for feminism and political thought in general (Grosz), before further clarifying this theory by way of an examination of his discussion of crystals and membranes as models for individuation (Sauvagnargues). In an attempt to think not simply *with* but also *after* Simondon, the book also explores the 'Implications' of Simondon's thought for contemporary philosophical reflection about anxiety, science, technology and aesthetics (Krtolica, Boucher, Barthélémy, Michaud). In addition, several of the contributions in the book explore the 'Resonances' of Simondon's thought in the work of other thinkers: Deleuze (Bowden), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (de Beistegui), Georges Canguilhem (Lecourt) and Martin Heidegger (Stiegler).

The book also includes an extensive glossary by Jean-Hugues Barthélémy, one of the most important Simondon scholars working in France today, which explains fifty key notions in Simondon's work. Importantly, the works referenced in this glossary include not only those works by Simondon that are soon to appear in English, but also all of Simondon's published works. Thus, the glossary provides something like a 'legend' to the map of Simondon's thought that this book lays out. As is the case with several of the other texts that are collected here, the glossary extends beyond the immediate scope of this book by helping the reader to situate *Psychic and Collective Individuation* and *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* in relation to Simondon's numerous other publications, many of which will hopefully one day become available in English as well.

We cannot conclude our introduction before briefly considering the questions, Why Simondon?, and more specifically, Why Simondon today? Both Brian Massumi and Elizabeth Grosz address these questions directly in their chapters, but we may briefly indicate the following. Simondon is a philosopher of technology whose works anticipate

in fascinating ways the subsequent developments of the technical world with which we are now dealing, such as the internet, and technologies of information and communication more generally.⁵ Simondon's originality as a philosopher of technology is indicated, first, by his critical rejection of cybernetics and attempt to formulate an alternative perspective, and second, his inscription of this theory of the nature of technical objects within a highly original, generalized ontology. This ontology describes the emergence and individuation of beings as such, delineating technical objects in terms of both their commonalities with and their differences from other types of beings.

Simondon provides a theory of being that is significantly inspired by the natural sciences; as Simondon's close relation to Canguilhem might suggest, his work establishes a bridge between philosophy and the sciences. Heavily influenced by developments in physics in his time, Simondon found himself – like his teacher Canguilhem, and like Canguilhem's own teacher Gaston Bachelard – in between these two disciplines. Simondon's ontology, which in its positive orientation towards the sciences was significantly at odds with Heidegger, was also an important inspiration to Deleuze. For these reasons, Simondon must be read as an interesting philosopher of technology and an ontologist in his own right, while also being situated at a number of historically significant points of contact with other major developments in twentieth-century thought.

More than this, however, Simondon's work is of particular value for the currents of thought now developing in the early twenty-first century. As Massumi and Grosz both note, over the last decades intellectual currents in the humanities have shifted from a context unreceptive to Simondonian thought to one in which the moment seems ripe for his (re)discovery. As Massumi glosses this, it has entailed a move from the prevailing acceptance of 'constructivism' to what he calls 'inventivism'. While constructivism focuses on the cultural construction of reality while remaining sceptical towards the claims of the natural sciences, inventivism seeks to think the natural processes involved in any and all constructions. Grosz suggests that constructivism (which she associates with structuralism and poststructuralism) was a necessary corrective to essentialist forms of thought, but one which overcompensated. Moreover, contemporary philosophical thought is increasingly engaged in explicitly ontological investigations. In the wake of Deleuze, philosophers like Badiou, Quentin Meillassoux and certain strains of speculative realist thought have once again posed the goal of thinking in terms of being. In this regard too, the arc of contemporary thought has

brought it back into the terrain mapped out in such a powerful way by Simondon himself.

We are now in a position to think in a more balanced way the relation between the processes which have previously been designated the natural and the cultural, and perhaps, with Simondon, to question this distinction itself. Fighting relentlessly against the classical oppositions of the vital to the mechanical, Simondon always tried to think further than what the traditional delimitations of disciplines allowed. This is, no doubt, part of the reason why his thought has proved to be so extraordinarily stimulating for the writers who have contributed to this volume, and which we hope it will also prove to be for its readers. As Friedrich Nietzsche famously suggested, some people are born posthumously.⁶ In our view, contemporary coordinates suggest that the time is right for Simondon's (second) 'birth'.

NOTES

1. This translation is forthcoming with the University of Minnesota Press.
2. This translation is forthcoming with Semiotext(e).
3. The special issue is available at: <http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/past.html#issue07>.
4. To our knowledge, excerpts from Simondon's work have previously been published in English in: Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (eds), *Incorporations* (New York: Zone, 1992), Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (eds), *Interact or Die!* (Rotterdam: V2_, 2007) and *Parrhesia*.
5. In addition to the chapters by Massumi and Grosz, see Henning Schmidgen, 'Thinking Technological and Biological Beings: Gilbert Simondon's Philosophy of Machines', *Revista do Departamento de Psicologia – UFF*, 17.2 (2005), pp. 11–18 (www.scielo.br/pdf/rdpsi/v17n2/v17n2a02.pdf).
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Preface' to *The Anti-Christ*, in Aaron Ridley (ed.), Judith Norman (trans.), *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.