### 'DU MORT QUI SAISIT LE VIF': SIMONDONIAN ONTOLOGY TODAY<sup>1</sup> Jean-Hugues Barthélémy, translated by Justin Clemens

# INTRODUCTION: THE CHEMICAL, THE APOPTOTIC, AND THE ARTEFACT; OR, THE HYPOTHESIS OF THREE TYPES OF 'NON-LIFE' THAT CONDITION LIFE AS EVOLUTION

As the title of this Introduction indicates, I will not ask myself about the as-it-were metaphysical distinction between the dead ['le' mort] and death ['la' mort]. What interests me is more generally the presence of 'non-life' in life, and as the very condition of life. I would like to suggest that different stages of life qua evolution correspond to different types of essential non-life. The 'non-living' can certainly designate the artefact, but it first of all signifies inert naturalness [naturel], therefore the physical. Simondon sees in the physical and the 'vital,' as he says, two 'regimes of individuation.' But in choosing to treat of 'le mort qui saisit le vif,' I propose in fact, as will appear, to cover the whole genetic ontology of Individuation in the light of notions of form and information<sup>3</sup> insofar as it derives from the living the third regime of individuation itself, called by Simondon the 'transindividual.' But the red thread of this traversal of genetic ontology is in another way what, to my mind, allows us at the same time to unify and exceed it, because this red thread is what I have elsewhere called the 'auto-transcendent sense' of the Simondonian genetic ontology. Such are the stakes of my account, because the exegesis of the Simondonian oeuvre from which my first two works emerged would already be polemical in its very fidelity, and concerned by this to locate in Simondon what might give him all his contemporaneity.

The expression 'du mort qui saisit le vif' comes from Marx, who in fact wrote at the beginning of Capital: 'We suffer not only from the living, but from the dead. Le mort saisit le vif!' Marx here concludes a remark about political and social consequences 'à contre-temps,' which are engendered by certain past modes of production. For my part, I want to give another sense to this formula, broader and closer to the famous proposal of Auguste Comte regarding the historicity of humanity as the presence of the dead. My thesis will be more precisely the following: humanity is that form of psycho-social life which, by means of the non-living artefacts that support it and

*found* its historicity, *extends bio-psychic* animal life of which the non-living *condition* is not yet the artefact but simple *apoptosis* ('cellular suicide'), and whose *origin* is a third form of 'non-life': the *chemical* non-living.

In order that there is no misunderstanding about this thesis, I will immediately specify, and raising it in the order of its different points, that:

- 1. It is supposed here that the life of the living comes from what it isn't. Simondon himself, while refusing mechanism as reductionism applied to life, accepts that vitalism isn't any more defensible. His own way of refusing mechanism thus consists in thinking the physical and the vital as both coming from a 'pre-physical and pre-vital' reality, because preindividual. Moreover, Simondon envisages applying the idea of neotenia to the passage of the non-living towards the living: vital individuation would be the perpetuation of an inchoate phase of physical individuation itself. I won't have the opportunity to return here to this question of the non-living origin of life, and will dedicate myself instead to the question of apoptosis as the second form of 'non-life' rendering life possible. I will analyse the text of Simondon's that expresses an intuition in the direction of this reality that has recently been confirmed and accepted by biology, after a century of dispersed inquiries.
- 2. The artefacts produced by animals other than humans, such as, for example, the bird's nest or the beehive, don't aim at making possible a psycho-social life, but only a bio-psychic or bio-social life: as Simondon remarks, the 'pure social,' that we must understand in opposition to the psycho-social and not in opposition to the biological, exists in insects because their social character doesn't nourish a psyche. Reciprocally, birds and, even more so, mammals develop a psyche without passing by the social. Only the primates and, even more so, humans, are psycho-social, that is, a reality in which the individual psyche is paradoxically developed on the basis of the collective. This paradox is that of what we call 'interiority' or rather, with Simondon, 'personality,' of which Simondon said that it could precisely not be thought on the basis of the opposition exterior/interior (or transcendence/immanence).
- 3. When I affirm that artefacts make possible a psycho-social life and that this is only fully realised with the human, I do not put language *next to* artefacts, nor do I forget the artefacts produced by our 'psycho-social cousins' the primates. Because, *on the one hand*, language is itself also an artefact, undoubtedly moreover indispensable so that other artefacts can become supports for our psychosocial personality. Through language, in which thought is elaborated, the artefacts produced in the 'external world' nourish in return the human mind. This thesis corresponds in fact to Bernard Stiegler's extension of works that were already a major source for Simondon: I speak of the works of Leroi-Gourhan on the *parallelism* between the development of language and that of tools. *On the other hand*, the artefacts produced by primates are not preserved by them after use, and thus cannot define a historic world coming to nourish mind, even if these artefacts are certainly an extension of the living body.

## THE ARTEFACT, OR THE 'NON-LIFE' THAT MAKES A *PSYCHO-SOCIAL* LIFE POSSIBLE

I will pick up the order of the complexification in a reverse direction and begin with the question of the transindividual regime of individuation insofar as it is a *psycho-social* life conditioned by this ultimate form of 'non-life' that is the artefact. That it is a matter here of a question, including when one starts with Simondon, sticking with the fact that psycho-social life and culture seem to have technique as a 'phase,' as Simondon magisterially demonstrated in *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. But the question is knowing if this necessary phase would not be even more, that is, *a foundation and a frame* for the other phases of culture. We know that with Simondon technique is only a phase issuing from the 'phase difference' [déphasage] of the 'primitive magical unity,' which for him does not seem to contain the presence of artefacts but only that of natural 'key points.'

This is, moreover, what I criticized Simondon for at the end of the second volume of my polemical exegesis.<sup>8</sup> But I want to come back here to the elements of his thought, and perhaps also to its *tensions*, which may themselves call for a revision of this thought in the direction of a *foundation* of the transindividual or of the psycho-social *upon* artefacts.

In the secondary thesis [Thèse complémentaire] for his doctorate Du mode d'existence des objets techniques, Simondon returned to the question of the transindividual that he had treated in his main thesis [Thèse principale] L'individuation à la lumiere des notions de forme et d'information. He writes:

The technical object taken according to its essence, that is, the technical object insofar as it was invented, thought and willed, assumed by a human subject, becomes the support and the symbol of this relation that we would call *transindividual*. [...] Through the intermediary of the technical object an interhuman relation that is the model of *transindividuality* is created. We can understand by this a relation that does not put individuals in relation by means of their constituted individuality separating them from each other, nor by means of what is identical in each human subject, for example the *a priori* forms of sensitivity, but by means of this charge of preindividual reality, of this charge of nature that is preserved with individual being, and that contains potentials and virtuality [*virtualité*]. The object that comes from technical invention bears with it something of the being that produced it, expressing of this being what is the least attached to a *hic et nunc*; one could say that there is human nature in technical being, in the sense that the word nature could be employed to designate what remains original, anterior even to the constituted humanity in the human.<sup>9</sup>

Why is the thought of the transindividual taken up here from the point of a thought of technique nonetheless absent from the main thesis? Before responding, two preliminary remarks should be made on the very letter of the text. Firstly, what the end of this passage says about the meaning of the word 'nature' allows us to understand that, in making the technical object the 'support' of the transindividual relation, the beginning of the passage does not envisage detaching the human from 'nature' and contradicts the main thesis. It is even rather because the technical object is elevated to the status of support of the transindividual relation that Simondonian thought escapes from what it combats under the name of essentialist 'anthropology.' Indeed, the technical object is for Simondon nature in the human — and not human 'nature' or the essence of the human —: 'the human invents by putting to work his own natural support, this apeiron that remains attached to each individual being.' It is therefore in subverting the opposition nature/technique that Simondon understands here to subvert the opposition nature/humanity, just as the Introduction to the work announces a subversion of this third opposition that is the opposition humanism/technicism. It

Secondly, the passage cited is itself inhabited by a tension, since it makes the technical object at once the 'support' and the 'symbol' of transindividuality, which does not exactly come back to the same thing. Nonetheless it's the idea of symbol that prevails in the book, the 'interhuman relationship' that is made 'through the intermediary of the technical object,' being, moreover, 'the model of transindividuality,' as Simondon says. The proposal of Du mode d'existence des objets techniques more generally consists in making the technical object a paradigm for the comprehension of what Simondon, following Merleau-Ponty rather than Heidegger, names our 'being in the world,' a paradigmaticism that considers the technique, however, only as being, in 'human reality', a 'phase' that comes from the 'phase difference' of the 'magic unity' in technique and religion.

But the sensed theoretical tensions here could only be the translation, in the secondary thesis, of tensions present at the heart of the main thesis. Above all, the idea of the technical object as the *support* of the transindividual relationship should *to my mind* be revalorised, because it is this that allows the resolution of the *ultimate difficulty* whose presence it is now a question of revealing at the heart of the main thesis. Undoubtedly what is at once the most profound and problematic text on the transindividual is in fact that dedicated to the 'problematic of reflexivity in individuation,' in which we find the following passage:

In fact, neither the idea of immanence nor the idea of transcendence can completely account for the features of the transindividual in relation to the psychological individual: transcendence or immanence are indeed defined and fixed before the moment when the individual becomes one of the terms of the relation in which it is integrated, but of which the other term has already been given. But if we accept that the transindividual is auto-constitutive, we will see that the schema of transcendence or the schema of immanence only accounts for this auto-constitution by their simultaneous and reciprocal position; it is indeed at each instant of auto-constitution that the relation between the individual and the transindividual is defined as what *exceeds the individual all the while extending it*: the transindividual is not external to the individual, yet is nevertheless detached to a certain extent from the individual.<sup>12</sup>

In order to problematise this passage, I will first refer to what appeared in the survey of the last chapter of my Penser l'individuation: with Simondon, the psycho-somatic split of the living manufactures the psychic 'transitory way' that concerns the 'subject,' whose 'personality' is, after a 'provisory emotional de-individuation,' transindividual actualisation, the paradoxical place of the greatest individuality as at once the most accomplished subversion of the opposition individual/milieu — the social no longer even being a milieu. This is why the transindividual or 'real collective' is the actualised type of the psychic itself: 'Psychological individuality appears as being what is elaborated in elaborating transindividuality. 13 Simondon specifies that this subversion of the opposition between immanence and transcendence by the transindividual draws from that 'there is an anteriority of the transindividual in relation to the individual,' this anteriority being indeed what 'hinders defining a relation of transcendence or immanence.'14 But such an anteriority can not signify that there would be an equivalence between the transindividual and the preindividual, even if certain passages favour the confusion, as is the case in these lines: 'The psycho-social is of the transindividual: it is this reality that the individuated being transports with it, this charge of being for future individuations.' This possible confusion is only another aspect of an insistence — crucial — on the fact that transindividual *individuation* — because it is certainly such — constructs radical individuality beyond even the individual, because it is the 'subject' as a preindividual-individual ensemble that individuates itself. It is this that renders transindividual individuation thinkable with difficulty, except by saying with Simondon, in a passage cited above, that 'the transindividual is defined as what exceeds the individual all the while extending it: the transindividual is not external to the individual and is nevertheless detached to a certain extent from the individual.'

It remains that the difficulty represented by the idea of the anteriority of the transindividual is not thereby resolved. If the anteriority of the transindividual over the individual does not signify that there would be an equivalence between the transindividual and the preindividual, how then to give it [any] sense? It is here that the idea of the technical object as support of the transindividual seems to me able to work. Because this support is first of all the 'symbol' that 'expresses,' as Simondon says, the preindividual part attached to the 'subject.' Then, passing from the idea of the technical object as 'symbol' to that of the technical object as 'support,' is to consider that the technical object receiving the preindividual part of the 'subject' is also reciprocally what makes this 'subject' accede to transindividual individuation in its distinction with the preindividual. The technical object would thus be this mediation by which the transindividual is constituted in its incomprehensible psycho-social indissociability, because it would offer the place sought by Simondon in his main thesis under the name of what 'interiorises the exterior' and 'exteriorises the interior,' and that as such is 'anterior.'

But Simondon thinks the technical *beyond* the simple artefact, under the pretext that the technical is only truly 'concretised' in the modern machine, and will thus never posit the technical object as at the same time an 'expression' of the preindividual attached to the 'subject' *and as foundation of the transindividual individuation*. He writes, on the contrary, that 'between the human and nature is created a technogeographic milieu that becomes possible only through the intelligence of the human being: the autoconditioning of a schema through the result of its functioning necessitates the use of an inventive function of *anticipation* that finds itself neither in nature nor in technical objects already constituted.' If it is therefore necessary to recognise here my 'infidelity' to the letter of Simondon's text, the question *at the very least* proposes itself of knowing if the transindividual, such

as Simondon himself attempts to think it through his main, then his secondary thesis — that is, such that he is embarrassed by it and finds himself plunged into theoretical tensions — is not in fact artefactually founded. In such a perspective, one could say with Stiegler that the finitude of the living requires the latter to not be able to be transindividually individuated, therefore in psycho-social 'personality' to speak with Simondon, except by resting on those 'crutches of the mind' that are non-living artefacts.

### THE TWO MEANINGS OF DEATH AND APOPTOSIS AS 'VITAL DEATH'

I come now to this living [being] itself before its psycho-social individuation, to demonstrate in which way it is also rendered possible by *a type* of 'non-life': the life of the living is only developed by passing by apoptosis or 'cellular suicide.' Simondon himself had, in a passage from *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique*, divided the idea of death in order to think a certain *constitutivity of death* in relation to life:

Death exists for the living in two senses that do not coincide: it is adverse death [...]. But death exists also for the individual in another sense: the individual is not pure interiority: it weighs itself down with the residues of its own operations; it is passive in itself; it is itself its own exteriority [...]. In this sense, the fact that the individual is not eternal should not be considered as accidental; life in its ensemble can be considered as a transductive series; death as final event is only the consummation of a process of deadening that is contemporaneous with each vital operation as operation of individuation; every operation of individuation lodges death in the individuated being that is progressively charged with something that it cannot eliminate; this deadening is different from the degradation of the organs; it is essential to the activity of individuation.<sup>17</sup>

Because death, understood in the second sense, is here only a deposit [dépôt] for vital individuation, it could seem to be confused with death understood in the first sense. Indeed, the idea of a deposit—even necessary rather than accidental — does not yet allow thinking a constitutivity of death in relation to the living. This is because the deposit, as such, is 'stripped of potentials and can no longer be the basis of new individuations.' But the difference resides in that death in the first sense 'translates the very precariousness of individuation, its confrontation with the conditions of the world,' while death in the second sense 'does not come from the confrontation with the world, but from the convergence of internal transformations.' Nothing could be further from my mind than the idea that Simondon would have thought apoptosis as condition of life for an epoch in which biology was yet to ask itself as to the nature of apoptosis. Simply, he enters into the logic of a thought of the individuation by wanting, as Simondon had in effect wanted, to subvert all the classical oppositions — and even that between life and death, for the little that we distinguish between scales of individuation.

Contemporary biology is in a position to affirm, as does Jean-Claude Ameisen in his work *La sculpture du vivant*, that death is at the very heart of life. Ameisen's work in fact seems to me to reveal *two* different aspects of this presence. *On the one hand*, the construction of the embryo implies the auto-destruction of a great number of cells. Whence the metaphors of 'sculpture' and of its condition – the cellular 'suicide' -, applied not only to the formation of the brain and immune system, but also to that of the organism in its entirety:

From the first days that follow our conception — at the very moment our existence begins — cellular suicide plays an essential role in our body in the course of construction, sculpting successive metamorphoses of our form in becoming. In the dialogues that are established between different families of cells in the course of being born, language determines life or death. In the sketches of our brain and our immune system — the organ that will protect us from microbes — cellular death is the integrative part of a strange process of apprenticeship and auto-organisation whose accomplishment is not the sculpture of a form but that of our memory and our identity [...]. It is cellular death that, in successive waves, sculpts our arms and legs on the basis of their sketches, to the extent that they grow, from their base towards their extremities. At the interior of our pre-arms, it creates the space that separates our bones, the radius and the cubitus. Then it sculpts the extremities of our members: our

hand is first of all born in the form of a mitten, of a palm, containing five branches of cartilage that project themselves from the wrist and prefigure our fingers. Death thus brutally makes the tissues that join the superior portion of these branches disappear, individualising our fingers and transforming the mitten into a glove.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, and this second aspect verifies at the same time that the first aspect is really an *auto*-destruction of cells, every cell is equipped at the same time for auto-destructing and hindering this auto-destruction, in such a way that the life of the organism once formed is only an *inhibited death* [mort empêchée], and that it is moreover not long for the cells that should be renewed each day or close to it, like the cells of the skin:

Whatever their duration of normal life in our bodies, from forty-eight hours to several weeks, from several months to several years, from some decades to perhaps more than a century, each of the cells that constitute us is, permanently, at each instant, capable of auto-destruction. And it will trigger its suicide within hours — at most in several days — if it is deprived of signals that allow it to survive. At the beginning of the 1990s, a new notion of life emerged: living, for each cell that composes our bodies, is, at each moment, to have succeeded in restraining the triggering of suicide. The differenciation that leads, in different cell families, to the locking mechanism of most genes — including, in numerous cell families, for example the neurones, and the locking mechanism of genes that allow the cells to divide themselves — never obliterates, it seems, in any cell, throughout our life, certain genetic information allowing the triggering of the implementation of suicide [...]. The daily suicide of hundreds of billions of cells in our bodies only represent the visible manifestation of a permanent potentiality, anchored in each of our cells.<sup>21</sup>

Conclusion: life as difference from itself or 'non-essence'

At the end of this rapid examination of types of 'non-life' that condition life as biological evolution, then as psycho-social history, we can make a hypothesis regarding the nature of what we have thus named 'life': this 'nature' of life is perhaps precisely an anti-nature or a 'non-essence,' because life will be defined as difference from itself if:

- 1. it is anchored in what is not it (the chemical non-living [being]);
- 2. it evolves by using death as potentiality inscribed in each cell;
- 3. it is capable of sublimating itself into a psycho-social life where it fully accomplishes its character of non essence, since [hu]man, of whom it is said that he is historical and has no 'nature,' constructs his mind and personality through a process of 'exteriorisation' in artefacts that paradoxically condition the development of his 'interiority.'

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#### NOTES

- 1. This text is from a paper given in Paris 16 June 2007 at the colloquium 'Actualité de Simondon,' organised by the Centre Georges Canguilhem of the University of Paris 7 Denis Diderot and the College International de Philosophie.
- 2. [This utterly untranslatable phrase, which in fact functions as the original title of this article 'Du mort qui saisit le vif,' is, as Barthélémy explains in his next paragraph, derived from Karl Marx's Das Kapital; to be precise, from the 1867 Preface to the first German Edition, where it appears, naturally enough, in the original French. The phrase originally arises in the context of medieval French law, where it denominates the instantaneous transmission of sovereignty to the heir on the death of the previous monarch, or of property to the inheritor—a transmission which is considered to have taken place whether or not anybody marks the death-transfer with a speech-act or, indeed, whether or not anybody is aware of that death at the time. As such, the maxim is at the origins of the notorious utterance 'Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi!', which crystallises one biopolitical way in which the dead affect the living. Not only a fundamental principle of law and sovereign power, however, the specific translation problem here hinges on the currency of the word 'vif,' which, though retaining etymological links to the sequence that interests Simondon and Barthélémy, including: vivre (to live), vivant (the living [being]), vie (life), vivace (vivacious), viable (viable), etc., has lost in modern French the meaning of the 'living,' meaning something more like 'vivid,' 'bright,' 'lively.' While it is thus tempting to leave the phrase in French throughout—as I have done sometimes here—this proved unworkable, given its consistent and dedicated re-purposing in the article as a whole. I have therefore essayed to keep something of the etymological and the operational in my translating, preferring to render 'vif' as 'live,' in the sense of both what lives and what is 'lively.' Given Barthélémy's retranscription of this phrase into that of evolutionary ontology, it may well be worth noting Marx's own analogies, in the very same Preface, to microscopic anatomy and to physics. The other term here that has proven particularly frustrating to translate is the common 'actualité,' which refers to 'current events,' to what's 'topical' or 'present,' and which, in the plural 'actualités,' is simply 'the news.' Unfortunately, the word also retains links to an entire rat's-nest of philosophemes, such as the distinction between the 'actual' and the 'virtual,' among others. I have tried to mark this when possible and appropriate; otherwise, I have simply gone for idiomatic English—TN.]
- 3. G. Simondon, L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information (Grenoble: Millon, 2005).
- 4. J.-H. Barthélémy, Penser l'individuation: Simondon et la philosophie de la nature, preface de J.-C. Beaune (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005).
- 5. K. Marx, Capital, trans. B. Brewster, intro. E. Mandel (London: New Left Review, 1976), p. 91.
- 6. Marx, ibid, emphasis in original.
- 7. G. Simondon, Du mode d'existence des objets techniques (Paris: Aubier, 1958). See also my commentary in the second part of Penser la connaissance et la technique après Simondon (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), as well as the more recent final chapter of my work of synthesis Simondon ou l'Encyclopédisme génétique (Paris: P.U.F., 2008).
- 8. See Penser la connaissance et la technique après Simondon, op. cit., second part, chapter II, 4.
- 9. Simondon, Du mode d'existence, pp. 247-248 (emphasis in original).
- 10. Ibid, p. 248. The non-contradiction between the Simondonian critique of essentialist anthropology and the idea of a technical support of the transindividual has been developed in my *Penser la connaissance et la technique après Simondon (op. cit.)*, on the occasion of the polemical exegesis of *Du mode d'existence des objects techniques*.
- 11. Simondon in fact writes: 'The opposition erected between culture and technique, between [hu]man and machine, is false and without foundation; it only covers over ignorance or resentment. It masks behind a facile humanism a reality that is rich in human efforts and natural forces, and that constitutes the world of technical objects, mediators between nature and the human,' Du mode d'existence des objets techniques, op. cit., p. 9. It is truly the three oppositions mentioned that are here combated in a single gesture. For 'facile humanism,' Simondon substitutes, not a technicism nor at least a 'naturalism' which would be an anti-humanism, but a difficult humanism because it wagers on the subversion of interlaced oppositions between nature, humanity and technique. This is why I cannot agree with Daniel Colson's presentation in Petit lexique de l'anarchisme, de Proudhon à Deleuze (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2003). Besides, if Deleuze did the first review—even laudatory—of L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique and was personally inspired by this work, this is evident on all other points, relative to his thought of 'difference' and of the 'impersonal and preindividual transcendental field'—even if one could also denounce a recuperation there. As far as anti-humanism and anarchism, Simondon is less approached by it than by the excellent Pour l'homme of his friend Mikel

Dufrenne, whose subtle critique—addressed to anti-humanism—would be in the service of this 'difficult humanism' that corresponds to the subversion, of utmost importance to a phenomenologist like Dufrenne, of classic alternatives. On this question, see my Simondon, ou l'Encylopédisme génétique, op. cit.

- 12. On *a certain* anticipation, notably by the Merleau-Ponty of *Signs*, of the Simondonian thought of technology, see Xavier Guchet, 'Theory of the social bond, technology and philosophy: Simondon as reader of Merleau-Ponty,' *Les études philosophiques*, n°2, Paris, 2001.
- 13. G. Simondon, L'individuation psychique et collective (Paris: Aubier, 1989), p. 156 (emphasis author's). We recall that this work of Simondon's forms the last third of his main thesis, which appeared in a unified and complete fashion under the title of L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information.
- 14. Ibid, p. 157.
- 15. Ibid, p. 195.
- 16. Ibid, p. 157 (emphasis in original).
- 17. L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique (Grenoble: Millon, 1995), pp. 213-214. We recall that this work of Simondon's is left to the first two thirds of the main thesis. Regarding the passage cited, it is undoubtedly not by chance if Simondon wrote it when he anticipated a second time—after its first anticipation in the sub-chapter 'The successive levels of individuation'—on the treatment of the 'collective' in its relation to 'the individuation of the living.'
- 18. Ibid.
- 19. Ibid, p. 213, my emphasis.
- 20. Jean-Claude Ameisen, La Sculpture du Vivant. Le Suicide cellulaire ou la Mort créatrice (Paris: Seuil, 2003), pp. 16 and 40.
- 21. Ibid, p. 138.