
What is Relational Thinking?^[1]

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With Simondon, there resounds, once again, the assertion: everything is relational. More precisely, he centres all the exploration of nature, in its multiple aspects, with the fundamental principle of “being is relation”. By drawing on a lineage of philosophers, from Leibniz to Whitehead by way of Tarde, who attempted to make the relational a transcendental or genetic principle, he asserts that the question of being, without losing its pertinence, should be decentred in favour of the relational. It is this major reversal that we would like to analyse here by presenting evidence of its effects in our experience. If Simondon’s philosophy is to be relevant today it is because, in our view, it proposes the most contemporary of problems: how among the diverse registries such as the physical, the biological, the psychic and the social do we characterize relations?

It can appear surprising to deal with elements as dissimilar as the physical, biological, collective and technical by linking them in a relational ontology of being. Certainly, the risk is that the differences between these domains could be levelled by a too-general proposition to which nothing could resist. “Being is relation” does in no way mean that we can ignore the specificities of existence of these domains or their problems. It’s a proposition which can be called “technique” [2] in the sense that it has no reach except if it functions in a manner which is local, situated and linked to constraints; it has no sense except in an

extended understanding of a problem whereby these domains can be rethought together in terms of the communications between them, necessarily transversal, and in their very specificities.

Being-Relational and Being-Individual

This proposition certainly has a priority effect: the challenge of a paradigm which has crossed modernity and which deploys itself, more or less implicitly, at every level of knowledge, in the orientations given to practices, in the way of relating to experience. This paradigm is that of “being-individual”. One can say, very schematically, that modernity will have been, according to Simondon, a research almost exclusively on the conditions of existence, the reasons, modalities and characteristics of the individual, granting it, implicitly or explicitly, an “ontological privilege to the constituted individual.” (Simondon Forthcoming: 4) [3]. It is “the individual, as a constituted individual, that is the interesting reality, the reality that must be explained” (Simondon forthcoming: 4). In one sense, we can say that the individual is a given, since we make no attempt to describe the genesis, the coming into existence, what Bergson calls the “reality in becoming”. [4] In another sense, we can say that this ‘being-individual’ is produced by an assemblage of practices, of cuttings, which seek to extract from experience this part of individuality. What characterises this paradigm is its way of presenting these productions of “being-individual” as things, which are given or encountered in experience. This truly is an abstraction in the literal meaning of the word: to abstract a part of the experience. Therefore, all hybrid situations, the beings more or less completed, virtual or actual, the extensions of some elements in others should, according to this paradigm, ultimately reduce to a multiplicity of stable individuals, invariant and autonomous. Simondon would certainly return to William James when he wrote that, “whatever we distinguish and isolate conceptually is found perceptually to telescope and compenetrates and diffuse into its neighbours. The cuts we make are purely ideal” (1996: 49-50), with the difference that Simondon was interested in existence and not only in perception.

If we wish to rid ourselves of this abstraction, it is then necessary to switch to another plane, to pose the questions – whatever their field – at another level. In Bergsonian terms, we would say that we must move from an exclusively “reality-made” approach, to a general approach of “reality as becoming”. The problem must be re-posed at the level of the assemblage of processes, fabrications, the emergence of realities that we experience, that is to say, we must move from the “being-individual” to individuation.

We would like to show that the search for the principle of individuation must be reversed, by considering as primordial the operation of individuation from which the individual comes to exist and of which its characteristics reflect the development, the regime and finally the modalities (Simondon forthcoming: 5).

These regimes of individuation enable the question of individual existence a larger, more profound dimension to which it participates and from which it cannot be abstracted. This larger plane, necessary for constructing a way of thinking individuation which is at the same time, thinking relationally – requiring the two to identify with one another – Simondon calls this “preindividual nature”.

The Construction of a Plane of Nature

What is “preindividual nature”? Simondon returns to a notion of nature close to that of the Greek *physis*, which is to say, a source of all existence, a principle of origin, a unique plan. In a crucial passage in *Psychic and Collective Individuation*, he describes this nature, drawing on *physis*:

We might call nature the preindividual reality that the individual carries with him, in seeking to rediscover in the word nature, the meaning that the pre-Socratic philosophers gave it; the Ionian philosophers found the origin of all the species of being, prior to individuation: nature is the reality of the possible, under the kinds of this *apeiron* [5] from which Anaximandre created all forms of individuation: nature is not the opposite of man, but the first phase

of the self, the second being the opposition of the individual and the milieu, complementing the individual in relation to the whole (Simondon 2007: 196; translator's translation).

Simondon retains from *physis* only its requirement: to place oneself at a level of reality prior to that of things and individuals, the source of their creation. We would say that the individual comes from nature or rather is part of nature. Nature is not all things that exist, but the principle of their existence, the "transcendental" of all individual existence. However what strikes us as fundamental, is precisely the difference that Simondon notes in relation to thinking the *physis* in a way that could be called "romantic". For him, and it is this that particularly interests us, preindividual nature is not something that we should return to, to which we should strive to be the most adequate possible, it is not the basis of all the elements of our experience, a sort of standard or a selective principal; it is a pure *construction*.

Preindividual nature is to be constructed to be able to report each individuation by linking it and by giving it larger dimensions. This is the methodological principle of Simondon's approach: in each situation encountered in experience, it is to invent and to construct a plane which increases its dimensions and puts into perspective the manner in which it is constituted and relates to other elements of experience. Whatever the intended domain – physical, biological, psychological, collective or technical – Simondon builds a plane (a surface), which he poses prior to their differentiations and which allows him to start with what relates them before differentiating them. This is the condition so that the problem of individuation is not the simple mirror of a thought of being-individual, that it does not generalise characteristics.

We can therefore define individuation as the passage from nature to the individual, but on three conditions:

1. Extend the notion of nature. Nature must be conceived as all existing things and realities prior to individuation. These realities prior to individuation, but the

source of all individuation, regardless of the level of complexity, Simondon calls preindividual singularities. What is a preindividual singularity? Any definition is always specific because the very characteristic of a singularity is that it is defined only by its function: it breaks the equilibrium; [6] it creates a transformation or an individuation. It “may be the stone which initiates the dune, the gravel which is the germ of an island in a river carrying alluvium” (Simondon 1964: 36, translator’s translation). We could establish in all domains the singularities of a field from which a situation becomes unstable, transforms itself, follows a new trajectory which spreads (transductive propagation) [7] to the entire field. The characteristic of a singularity is that we cannot define its effects before they are established, that we cannot *a priori* delimit the space in which these effects will operate (a technical object may cause a rupture in a field and propagate something of its operation in other fields). But these examples have limitations as they return to already constituted realities, while the notion of singularity arises on a “preindividual” level; it is therefore necessary to imagine it as short of the constitution of these examples, that is to say, prior to the grain of sand, the technical object or the stone. [8] Therefore, we distinguish radically the notion of singularity from that of the individual (which implies identity, autonomy and a relative invariance).

2. Consider nature as the “actually possible”, which is to say, that which is likely to create something. By saying that nature is the actually possible, Simondon intends to make an important distinction between the possible and the actual. The possible is the preindividual singularities, which can cause an individuation, whilst the actual is the individual produced by the individuation. This constraint involves a valorisation of the possible, that is to say, singularities whose actuality is just an expression or an effect. This allows us to clarify and vary our definition of individuation: it is the passage from nature to the individual, which now means it is the passage from the possible to the actual, or even from singularities to individuals. Nevertheless, we must be very careful about the relationship possible/actual, as it could suggest that the possible already contains the actual, or even that nature includes virtually all being-individuals, and that the latter are merely the realisation of an already given nature. However, it is exactly the

opposite that Simondon intends to highlight by distinguishing the possible and the actual: if the possible is what gives rise to individuation, the individual, which arises, differs from the possible which led to its individuation. To produce or spark off does not mean “contain”: the possible does not contain the already actual before it emerges, because every individual is an event, which cannot be reduced to all the elements required by its genesis (we shall return to this later).

3. Extend individuation beyond being-individual. Individuation does not stop with the individual. The error of thinking about individuation in general is to make the individual the final phase, which would end the process of individuation. It is as if from the moment an individual is formed, there is no more room for a new individuation to occur to it. Rather, individuation is extended within and beyond the individual. And what arises from individuation is not a completely autonomous individual, which would exclude the nature from whence it came – this preindividual nature, source of the possible – but a hybrid shape, half-individual, half-preindividual. As an individual, it is the result of an individuation and, as a bearer of preindividual dimensions; it is the actor of new individuations, of new possible actualisations of the possible. It is as if the individual extended beyond itself – never in total adequacy – towards a wider nature, more undifferentiated than it carries with it. The frontiers of the individual, which define its identity and which differentiate it from all other individuals, are fuzzier, more dilated than they seem at first sight. There would be in the individual what we might call “fringes” which extend it to a larger nature and which participate in its identity. Simondon talks of an “individual-milieu”, a hybrid shape, charged with potentials and singularities. The individual, from an individuation of nature, seems to finally be no more than a kind of folding, which, unfolded, redeploys all of nature.

The Elements of Relational Thinking

What do the constraints of individuation bring to the level of thinking relations? First: that the question of relations, regardless of the area in which it arises, must be seen in the context of the genesis of the being-individual (whether this is a

technical object, the living or even physics), all true relations being essentially processual. It is because it has cut the relation and individuation that modern thinking has only been able to reproduce false problems such as how individuals can form groups, how subjects can enter into relations with objects etc. We suppose that the relation comes after the formation of the terms (subjects, individuals, objects, groups). But what the construction of the plane of nature allows is for the relation prior to the term to be within individuation. Individuals communicate in groups because they are all taken in individuations, becomings. Similarly, subjects are in relation to objects because they all tend to something other than themselves, something, which contributes to their identity. What communicate are not subjects between themselves, but regimes of individuation that meet.

Then: that the relation concerns a part of the individual which is not itself individual. It concerns preindividual singularities, those charges of nature of the possible which all individuals hold and which allow them to extend their individuation and produce new ones. The relations between individuals rarely focus on what they are but on a space of indeterminacy; this zone of preindividuations connecting them to a broader nature. Therefore, we can hypothesise that if preindividual nature precedes all distinctions between domains or modes of existence, the individual forms itself and extends elements which are at once physical, biological, technical and social, and which form a milieu within the individual itself.

Lastly: the relationship is neither prior, nor subsequent, to the regimes of individuation, but simultaneous (*a praesenti*) [9] to them. This simultaneity of relations and individuations is important because it implies that any relation is an immanent event to individuation, the contours and forms of which we cannot *a priori* trace. We do not know what can give rise to the effective connection (*mise en relation*) of heterogeneous elements – what we can call a being-collective in the wider sense (at once composed of objects, things, individuals, ideas, etc.) – as this

connection necessarily leads to a regime of individuation, which is to say, the emergence of something which cannot be reduced to its elements nor to any totality.

How to Relate to Individuations?

As soon as we say that all individuation is singular – an event – the limits, forms and consequences of which we cannot *a priori* determine, raises a question: how to describe or refer to a regime of individuation? There is, for Simondon, a limit to intelligence which approximates Bergson: all exclusively theoretical approaches to regimes of individuation, and thus of relation, necessarily transform, by cutting or stabilising, their novelty. As Bergson writes: “because it is always trying to reconstitute, and to reconstitute with what is given, the intellect lets what is new in each moment of a history escape. It does not admit the unforeseeable. It rejects all creation” (1998: 180). Intelligence is necessarily, for Bergson, related to a *ready-made* reality, because it is only interested in possible action on things, this action necessarily requesting, according to this vision of intelligence, a simplification of these. To be able to act on things, to master them, they must be identified and placed *at a distance* from the subject. But, if Simondon concurs with Bergson on the limits of intelligence (related to their qualities), he diverges from him by highlighting all the zones of “know-how”, semi-theoretical, semi-practical, operations and gestures which can be notably found, although not exclusively, in technical operations. There is a sort of immanent intelligence of “know-how”, what Polanyi called “tacit knowledge”, which cannot be reduced to discursive forms of knowledge. And if we can link him to Bergson on the critique of intelligence, as that which transforms the experience in favour of stable and homogenous being-individual, it is not necessary however to refer to an “intuition”. The opposition of intelligence and intuition tends to ignore the fundamental part of immanent intelligence, which can be explained in the operating practices in which it is held, engaged, and which is transmitted through collective participation (transmission of know-

how). These forms of knowledge bring us closer to what is an individuation by not distinguishing the process from the reality produced, the operation from its result.

It is therefore not necessary to escape individuations to describe them. Quite the contrary, as Simondon indicates in a crucial passage in *Psychic and Collective Individuation*:

We cannot, in the common understanding of the term, *know individuation*, we can only individuate, individuate ourselves, and individuate within ourselves (Simondon 2009: 13).

We can stretch this principle, beyond that of knowledge, to all forms of participation in schemes of individuation: they imply individuation in the assemblage of elements from which they are composed. A collective is nothing other than the encounter of a multiplicity of psychic, technical and natural individuations, which extend and overlap with one another. The collective is neither a superior reality to the individual, nor the foundation of all collective existence. What comes first, are the schemes of individuation, which are at once psychic and collective, human and non-human.

Notes

[1] This article first appeared in *Multitudes*, 18, Autumn 2004, as “Qu’est-ce qu’une pensée relationnelle?” part of a thematic section concerned with “Politics of Individuation: Thinking with Simondon.” Wherever possible, references have been made to the English versions of the texts. See (Debaise 2004).

[2] See, in this regard, the identification developed by Isabelle Stengers between technique, speculative and construction in her book *Penser avec Whitehead*. (Paris: Le Seuil, 2003).

[3] Also see the recently published special issue of *Parrhesia* (Issue 7), which includes an excerpt of this translation (Simondon 2009). The page numbers referred to here are those of the excerpt, which constitutes the first part of Simondon’s introduction to the book, translated by Gregory Flanders.

[4] "In order that our consciousness shall coincide with something of its principle, it must detach itself from the already-made and attach itself to the being-made" (Bergson 1998: 259).

[5] TRANS: Apeiron, a Greek word, central to Anaximander's cosmological theory, meaning unlimited, infinite or indefinite.

[6] The concept of equilibrium refers here to what Simondon calls a "metastable" equilibrium, which is to say a tense balance, beyond stability, held by a high energy potential. Without this metastable equilibrium, a singularity would never be able to "break the balance". It is the fragile, unstable character of a heterogeneous relation, which gives a singularity the possibility of transforming the equilibrium.

[7] "By transduction we mean an operation – physical, biological, mental, social – by which an activity propagates itself from one element to the next, within a given domain, and founds this propagation on a structuration of the domain that is realized from place to place: each area of the constituted structure serves as the principle and the model for the next area, as a primer for its constitution, to the extent that the modification expands progressively at the same time as the structuring operation" (Simondon forthcoming: 11).

[8] "The individuality of the brick, by which this brick expresses such an operation which has existed here and now, envelopes the singularities of the here and now, extends them, amplifies them" (Simondon 1964: 46, translator's translation).

[9] Simondon uses this idea of *a praesenti* to account for the relations in the present, produced simultaneously with individuation. He writes of concepts that they are "neither *a priori* nor *a posteriori* but *a praesenti*, as there is an informative and interactive communication between that which is greater than the individual and that which is smaller than it" (Simondon 2007: 66, translator's translation).

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