TECHNOPHANY
A Journal for Philosophy and Technology

Technophany Vol.4 No.1

Book Review: Organism-Oriented Ontology by Audronė Žukauskaitė

Ben Woodard

As a rather diffuse discourse, the philosophy of biology has been dominated by Anglo-American analytic philosophy for the last four to five decades. While biology emerged as a discipline in the early 1800s, it openly engaged in philosophical questions before then and well into the 20th century. In particular, French thought took questions of the concepts at use in the life sciences quite seriously as evident in the work of Canguilhem, Ruyer, Simondon, and others.

Two changes took place in the 1960s, namely that French and more broadly continental philosophy engaged less and less with the details of the life sciences and became increasingly interested in biopolitics and the concerns of biology (and the politicization and weaponization of biology).

In analytic circles, the philosophy of biology summarily dismissed its prehistory and placed its emphasis on the post-genetic revolution while making reference to Aristotle, Kant, and Darwin. While critical work on biology in continental and anglophone circles has escaped this narrowing view, it tends to happen outside of the philosophy of biology proper (whatever that means) and occurs in Science and Technology Studies and Critical Theory. Žukauskaitė's *Organism-Oriented Ontology* joins a short list of philosophical exceptions (alongside Eugene Thacker's *Afterlife,* to take one example).

Žukauskaitė begins with a discussion of Simondon emphasizing his theory of individuation. In particular, she focuses on transduction, the ways in which differences between processes are maintained despite transformations through a restructuring of the relations between the processes.[1] Importantly for the discussion of biology, Simondon attempts to work around the matter form distinction and is therefore against any notion of easy atomistic materialism as well as any transcendental appeal to pre-existing forms.[2]

Critically, Žukauskaitė argues that Simondon's notion of transduction complicates both a Darwinian and Lamarckian understanding of the organism in relation to its environment.

1 Audronė Žukauskaitė, *Organism-Oriented Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 24.

2 Žukauskaitė, 25–26.

ISSN 2773-0875

Simondon seems to suggest that evolutionary theory, as portrayed by Darwin in particular, cannot work because it assumes there is always already a fixed relation between organism and environment. Furthermore, Simondon argues that both Darwin and Lamarck do not take perception's relation to adaptation seriously, and this also presents a far less dynamic view of the organism.

Because Simondon does not cite sources here, it is hard to know whether he is really speaking about Darwin and Lamarck or about the status of evolutionary theory generally during the time of writing *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information.* If the latter, this loss of the organism would make total sense given that evolutionary biology tends towards statistical models of population, with cell theory and morphology more generally becoming sidelined. In addition, it is striking that Simondon relies more upon psychology (Kurt Lewin) and physiology (Kurt Goldstein).

The other point is Simondon's relation to cybernetics. Following Simon Mills, Žukauskaitė points out that Simondon's notion of information is different from that of classical cybernetics, and yet at the same time Simondon is said to be inspired by Norbert Weiner. This is further complicated by the fact that the influence of cybernetics stretches deep into post-war French philosophy (Foucault, Deleuze, Ruyer etc).

In her chapter on Raymond Ruyer, Žukauskaitė draws parallels between Simondon's concerns over avoiding the trap of matter and form with Ruyer's attempts to avoid the deadlock of preformation and finalism. Ruyer sees something of value in organicism as trying to avoid these two forms of thinking philosophy but ultimately poses his own solution. This solution is to discuss a distinction between real or absolute individuals and aggregates of matter.[3]

Žukauskaitė's gloss on Ruyer is particularly welcome as he is far less known than all the other figures presented in her work. The comparison with Simondon is also helpful as Ruyer's total overview of form, a kind of view from everywhere, can appear very much as a transcendent argument, a transcendent argument exactly in the form he wishes to reject. What is complex in Ruyer is parsing his use of the biological sciences (especially morphology) with his philosophical commitments, in particular, his discussion of different phases of the organization of beings as being analogous to, or even equated with, levels of consciousness. As she helpfully summarizes:

> Consciousness (the observer) is not beside or above the phenomena to be observed but acts itself as the observing system. In this respect, Ruyer's

3 Žukauskaitė, 39–40.

> notion of self-survey functions like a self-observing model of recursive cognition found in second-order cybernetic systems. What is original in Ruyer's theory is that this capacity of self-survey, or self-observation, is not only characteristic of the self-reflective consciousness of humans, but is extended to all organic forms.[4]

Chapter three of the book focuses on the work of Deleuze and Guattari. I will focus less on this chapter because discussions of Deleuze and Guattari and biology have become increasingly commonplace: the aforementioned *Afterlife* by Eugene Thacker, numerous books by Elizabeth Grosz, Keith Ansell Pearson, Jane Benett and many others. In line with the previous chapters, this chapter is most helpful because it draws out the specific points where Deleuze and Guattari take from and mutate ideas from Ruyer and Simondon. But, as is the case with Ruyer, it appears that the organismic dimension of life at this stage in the text starts to become dematerialized. Or, in other words, it starts to become difficult to delineate the difference between an immanent view of life that is over-determined by human consciousness and the view of human consciousness as merely one edge of life's equipotentiality.

Chapter 4 discusses Catherine Malabou's notion of plasticity. In line with the previous chapters, Žukauskaitė relates Malabou's work to the potentiality of the life form and, leaning back on the chapter on Deleuze and Guattari, there is significant push on the relation of the neuronal and the psychological. In addition, and perhaps more relevant to Simondon, is Malabou's critique via Kant, of preformationism and of a certain informational paradigm in the biological sciences. Most provocative is the closing argument of Chapter 4: "Biological plasticity allows us to imagine different forms of life and subjectivity, free to take any shape or form and to avoid the pressure of normativity. Where plasticity deserts, biopolitics takes over."[5]

In the second part of Žukauskaitė's book, she focuses less on pivotal figures and more on exchanges between thinkers of the organic via their discussions of Simondon, Leroi-Gourhan, Bergson, Whitehead, and others. Central to the initial part of this discussion is the notion of organology: essentially that technology is viewed as an extension of biology, that there is technical and at times anthropological analyses of how technics are an extension not only of labor but also memory. One of the most rewarding parts of this, at least for me, was a distinction between Simondon and Bernard Stiegler's reading of Simondon:

4 Žukauskaitė, 53.

5 Žukauskaitė, 95.

> For Simondon, the technical object is part of a general ontogenesis; therefore it is determined by pre-individual potential and by the associated milieu, whereas a human being, an inventor, is only a part or a side-effect of this development. By contrast, for Stiegler, a human being and a technical object are co-constituted: a human being originates at the moment when it is externalised in technical tools and prostheses. In this respect, human development is co-constitutive with technological development.
>
> This approach is radically different from Simondon's belief that a technical object has its own 'mode of existence' and that it is quasi-autonomous from the human being.[6]

The following chapter (chapter 6) extends the ideas of autopoiesis, conscious-life, cybernetics, and the like to recent attempts by thinkers such as Stengers and Latour to recuperate James Lovelock's Gaia theory—that the Earth is a giant organism-like self-organizing system. Žukauskaitė's book brings a welcome critique of Latour as well as Donna Haraway's readings of autopoiesis (and sympoiesis) in *Staying with the Trouble*. In one fitting passage she writes:

> Haraway invites us to create tentacular webs and assemblages with other species. However, what I find problematic in this project is that these connections work only on the imaginary and speculative level, avoiding the real interaction with other species. The relationship with animal partners remains vaguely defined, and in some cases – such as poetically described interactions with companion species (Haraway 2008) – looks very problem-atic because it is still embedded in the logic of anthropocentrism and asserts the supremacy of the human species.[7]

Žukauskaitė's book is a concise analysis of the place and role of the organism, or perhaps organic thinking, within the tradition of continental philosophy. In particular, it is interested in how the legacy of post-war French thought intersects with how we think biological systems today and suggests that this thinking should be renewed in order to address some of the more massive political deadlocks of the present, namely the status of biopolitics and what to do with the concept of the anthropocene.

My major contention with the book is in fact not so major, but one concerning title: why ontology? Given the ruse of ontology especially when conjoined with 'oriented', it

6 Žukauskaitė, 107.

7 Žukauskaitė, 138.

suggests a book that will involve a proliferation of entities or of long analyses of how particular objects (in this case organisms) function in the world. But in fact, this book is not a species biography via Science and Technology Studies nor is it a text so much about ontology as it is about a history of ideas, particularly the historical and philosophical construction of the organism and the organic system.

I think this fact is relevant to the very content of the book in that there is a tendency in continental philosophy, especially after Canguilhem, to abstract from the biological sciences (as suggested in the opening of this review). As a result, if one is not doing biopolitics (a la Foucault, Esposito, or Agamben), then it would seem that there is kind of institutional necessity to follow a broadly Deleuzian track, to focus on ontology or metaphysics, to align discoveries within the life sciences to notions of becoming, or to folding living systems under or within cognitive systems (always with the danger of unconscious human bias).

By focusing on the post-war period, Žukauskaitė shows that this forced choice is faulty and avoidable. One can be technically or scientifically literate while still paying attention to philosophical concepts and the history of ideas without making the sciences, and in particular the life sciences, merely the puppet of power or the window-dressing of philosophical enterprise.

Bibliography

Žukauskaitė, Audronė. *Organism-Oriented Ontology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.