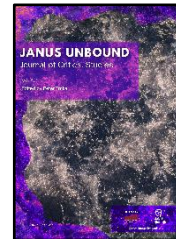


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The Organizing Dynamism and Its Egg: Ruyer and His Molar Theory of Multiplicities

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Translated by Conor O’Dea

Abstract

Hostile to all human exceptionalism, the work of [Raymond] Ruyer splits with the outmoded humanism of anthropocentric philosophies and neatly sets forth three decisive propositions for a contemporary ecological philosophy. Subjectivity is not reducible to the subject, consciousness is not localized in the brain, and sense is not localized in the signification of language. It is toward a critique of anthropomorphism that Ruyer invites us by way of his inventive re-use of the Bergsonian analysis of multiplicities, but this unfortunately spills over into a molar, non-theological conception of their articulation which paradoxically hardens into a colonial praise of domination.

Translator’s Introduction

Raymond Ruyer (1902-1987) was a French philosopher whose range of interests included science, biology, and cybernetics. His writings were influential for Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilbert Simondon, Georges Canguilhem, and Gilles Deleuze, among others. Relatively unknown in the English-speaking world until the last decade or so, Ruyer’s philosophy has become a touchstone for those working in European continental philosophy and philosophy of science.

In this essay Anne Sauvagnargues praises Ruyer’s efforts in breaking with the anthropocentric perspectives of his time but traces a strong, latent strain of colonialism in his work. Anne Sauvagnargues is a philosopher, painter, and writer. She teaches philosophy at Université Paris-Nanterre and is one of the world’s foremost Gilles Deleuze scholars. She has written prolifically on Deleuze’s connections to Ruyer and Gilbert Simondon, and has offered new paths of approaching Deleuze’s collaborations with Félix Guattari, focusing on their movement towards experimental and practical philosophy.

Some terms in this essay warrant further explanation. Of particular note is Sauvagnargues’s use of ‘differentiation’ (with a ‘c’ rather than a ‘t’), a neologism Deleuze borrows from Simondon, and which he juxtaposes with ‘differentiation’ (with a ‘t’). Differentiation, for Deleuze, occurs in the realm of the virtual,

the plane on which things insist rather than exist. Real but not actual, the virtual is differentiated in the sense of possessing diverging intensities, but it is only differentiated once actualized. The actual, the (also real) realm of differentiation, is the actualization of the virtual, which creates novelty, sense, and event.

‘Molar’ and ‘molecular’ are borrowed terms from chemistry used by Deleuze (in his works with Félix Guattari in particular), and refer, respectively, to given aggregates—roots, structures, things taken as a whole—and underlying processes, fragments, divergences, rhizomes.

‘Domanial’—a somewhat archaic term referring to fiefdoms and demesnes—is the translation I have opted to use for the French word *domaniale*, which is often translated as ‘state-owned property’. I feel ‘domanial’ carries the resonance of domination and colonialism more forcefully. *Montage* I have sometimes translated literally as ‘montage’, sometimes as ‘mounting’, depending on the context—it is particularly important in the neuroscientific frame where it can reference both imaging and exploration within a medium.

Introduction

Ruyer’s work engages stimulating ecological perspectives which touch on our most current political preoccupations. Resolutely hostile to all anthropomorphic preference, to all human exceptionalism, it splits with outmoded humanism and neatly sets forth three key propositions that seem to me decisive for a contemporary ecological philosophy. First, we cannot identify subjectivity with a constituted subject, *a fortiori* of an exclusively human type. Next, if subjectivity acts in the manner of a consciousness, this turns out to be irreducible to a human spiritual exception, but also to the individuated organ which is the brain and to the existence of a nervous system playing the role of a unified command post (a “subject”). These two principles, finally, imply that we must stop re-absorbing sense into the signification of language, reflexive, of the anthropomorphic type, whether it be a logical essence, an empirical determination, or the manifestation of the state of self-consciousness. It is towards this critique of conquering humanism—exclusive and unreflective—that Ruyer invites us by way of his inventive re-use of the Bergsonian analysis of multiplicities, which unfortunately spills over into an amorphous articulation and paradoxically ends up hardening into a colonial praise of domination.

Molar and Molecular Multiplicities

The inauguration of this ecological philosophy can be found in the primacy of becoming, that which [Henri] Bergson sets out in his theory of multiplicities.¹ We have the tendency to reduce the plural to the one in stabilizing becoming into a successive and localized ensemble of static, discrete, and echeloned positions. This sort of conception fractures the multiple into given unities, pulverizes it into additive quantities which at best compose an aggregative multiplicity, localized here and now. Subordinated to a discrete conception of the plural as an ensemble of unities, such a multiplicity gives place to nothing more than a collection of static elements, an amorphous assemblage, repetition without difference. Yet we commonly have the experience of quite different multiplicities,

those of our states of consciousness, which imply neither the aggregation of parts nor the juxtaposition of discrete unities in space, but rather the heterogeneous continuity of a duration which changes everything in transforming itself. These multiplicities reveal not an ontology (in which being relates to the one), but, if we can risk the term, a ‘rheology’² or ‘becomology’ (in which becoming relates to the heterogeneous and no longer to the unity of one-being). These multiplicities signal themselves by their operative character, their processual capacity, and not by their actual structures: such rheological multiplicities, subjective and heterogeneous, ‘become’; they ‘are’ not.

All Ruyer’s philosophy is laid out in this Bergsonian distribution between aggregative and rheological multiplicities, which he reframes under the Leibnizian distinction between monads and aggregates. As with Bergson, inert aggregative multiplicities, at best, present an interaction of functioning, *partes extra partes*, in the manner of a heap of sand, of a gas, or of a herd of sheep. Such macroscopic crowds, clusters of static elements juxtaposed edge to edge, are not conducive to an auto-forming subjectivity. Only rheological multiplicities change and support the unpredictable and improvisatory pursuit of a differentiation taking place.

To static and granular aggregative multiplicities are thus opposed transformative multiplicities, the only ones capable of real auto-formation, of rheological agency. At the same time, this transformative capacity is found firmly tied down to a unity of development: if the transformative charge relates to becoming, not to being, Ruyer has locked it, in a completely Leibnizian manner, to a unity of being, an agent whose individuality remains, as we will see, quite problematic. To nevertheless guarantee the rheological potency of its changing, and open, identity to an autopoiesis, Ruyer develops a passionate philosophy of the virtual, though it reintroduces the unity of subsistence, the indivision of a simple act, in its conception of agency. This agent is, however, neither individual nor individuated, even though it is undivided: this is, we will see, the indivision of a virtual connection, one capable of organization, which he names ‘auto-survey’, by which he designates a dominant formative capacity.

Thus, Ruyer doubles down on the Bergsonian division from a very different concern. Bergson distinguishes between space and time, a partition which flows to the bottom in the old Cartesian duality of extension and thought. By way of a torsion which brings him to contemporaneous scientific debates, Ruyer (2013, 135) distinguishes between statistical laws of the old thermodynamic physics, which relate to populations (“classical physics considers only crowds”), and the probability thresholds of existence in quantum physics. It is the old Cartesian extension which bifurcates between macroscopic aggregative structure *partes extra partes* and rheological agents. Aggregative multiplicities thus no longer consist in the spatializing impacts of the *elan vital* nor elsewhere in illusions of intelligence: these are aggregates in the Leibnizian sense, clusters, heaps, that is, macroscopic collections (“molars”), populations of agents. Gases composed of molecules, galaxies of stars, or schools of fish, present, whatever their scales, various collective phenomena of crowds, defined by statistical thresholds of their summation in large numbers. This summation can result

from entropic hazards (sedimentary deposits, alluvial deposits, riverbeds), a threshold of perceptibility required by observation (calculating the atomic weight of a chemical element or a gas), or even human fabrications (a watch mechanism). In these three cases, a ‘mounted’ structure is exhibited in a static manner as an assemblage of elements juxtaposed edge-to-edge, without itself being disposed to agency.

Aggregative multiplicities thus turn out to be “the spatial symptom of a system of far more fundamental connective forces” (Ruyer 1946, 5),³ non-actualized, neither mechanical nor localized, but rather virtual, and by that, according to Ruyer, psychic, ideal, and sensible. “In the water molecule, the hydrogen atoms are not to the side of the oxygen atom” (mechanical connection) but exist only as “conjointly delocalized” in this “mixed zone,” which qualifies a new existence: water, which Ruyer considers a new “domain” (2013, 122), since the atoms in effect “share” (conjointly) their (delocalized) electrons. Physical and chemical bodies themselves also belong to a sort of subjectivity in their own right. These are the connections (irreducible to mechanical connections) that Ruyer qualifies as psychic.

Whence a first startling result: the problem of the relations of soul and body “exist physically since there is nothing other than the problem of relations of real form and of visible structure” (Ruyer 1950, 38). This agency, “real without being actual, virtual without being ideal,” is not given in the actual, observable and localized structure. To guarantee its rheological potency, Ruyer slowly puts in place a conception of the virtual which separates from actual possibles, since it implies an activity occurring which does not pre-exist its actualization. If, therefore, Ruyer has the merit of exceeding strictly actualist or causal conceptions of development in proposing a conception of the virtual, which notably has an impact on the thought of [Gilles] Deleuze, he thereby binds rheological multiplicities to the unity of a subsistence: an atom of carbon, an embryo, certainly change, but perdure in duration.⁴

It is thus not on the molar plane, statistical and actual, of individuated macroscopic organisms (the egg) that it is necessary to understand agency, but rather at the micro-logical plane of organizing dynamisms. Thus, Ruyer transforms, in a pleasing way, [Albert] Dalq’s well-worn title, *The Egg and Its Organizing Dynamism* (*L’Œuf et son dynamisme organisateur*, 1941),⁵ suggesting that we should speak more of the organizing dynamism and its egg. The unity of possession (its eggs) better determines the embryogenetic potency of the organizing dynamism, of which the sole veritable principle of actualization, the actualized egg, marks only one result at a given instant: the actual egg—taken at an instant t —marks a threshold of actualization, a cut within a process of differentiation which will, or will not, lead to a particular actualized adult, be it crocodile or dove. This egg, which I hold between my fingers, is well endowed on a molar level, with a mass, localized in its spatio-temporal frame of reference, but the principle of its dynamism itself is not entirely actualized in this present anatomical structure, which it traverses and orients as its ‘domain’. It is partially actualized in this egg, but its consistency and persistence—Ruyer considers them one individuated subsistence—remain virtual, an improvisatory finality, at the same time typical

and singular, which overflows and frames all provisional empirical localization and all linear chronology. Saying it strongly: all existing consists of the crossing of these two references: the molar actualization of aggregative multiplicities (this egg composed of elements with detailable anatomical structure) and virtual rheological agency (its dynamism), unobservable.

According to this new repartition, Bergsonian multiplicities pivot around the axis of the molar and molecular, since aggregative multiplicities are indeed composed of rheological agents, but are themselves incapable of agency. A dune, for example, is arranged by entropy and external circumstances (winds, tides) but remains constituted by grains of sand, whose microphysical agency remains entirely intact. The distinction between the two multiplicities thus translates an epistemological tension much more radical than the old distinction between mechanism and vitalism, which shares the macroscopic contemporary physics of bodies and energetic quantum entities. Ruyer takes note of the contemporary epistemological rupture which provokes microphysics, relativistic cosmology and embryology, and it is at this level that the distribution of multiplicities between molar and molecular is imposed. Aggregative multiplicities may well belong to what we habitually consider “the world known as physics”—a “world of multiplicities of being edge-to-edge” (Ruyer 2013, 257)—which obey the secondary crowd phenomena the old physics studied exclusively. They are also really composed of rheological multiplicities. This “physical” threshold does not further qualify the reality of extended bodies; rather, an empirical molar threshold, globally Cartesian, of rheological multiplicities considers, by way of their statistical interactions, those that they offer to our perception “from outside.” Thus, only rheological multiplicities are subjective. The whole question is how to determine how aggregative and agentive multiplicities are arranged. The result is that Ruyer does not reserve subjectivity to the living, as this capacity of cohesive transformation expresses itself as much at the particulate and molecular level as at the vital level: a molecule of water, as we have seen, does not owe its nuclear unity to mechanical connections, but rather to this form of delocalized and subjective connection that Ruyer names a consciousness, and which, by way of conjointly delocalized atoms of hydrogen and oxygen, put into work a new composite “domain,” H₂O.

Subjectivity without Subject, Consciousness without Brain, Sense without Signification

If this notion of ‘domain’ remains quite problematic, the definition of subjectivity and of consciousness for Ruyer does not in any case conserve any further anthropomorphic trait, does not cling to any language-based, noetic or human cerebral reflexivity, but distributes itself wherever a real existence, an organizing dynamism perdures, or, moreover, is transformed in actualizing. This is why the subjective cannot be reduced to the subject (the human being), any more than we can identify consciousness with the brain, or fold back sense into language-based signification. These three tonic propositions—a subjectivity without subject, a consciousness non-localized in its brain, sense as activity before being deposited in a signification—are rigorously enchained and constitute, for me,

the requisites of a contemporary ecological philosophy. We cannot reduce subjectivity to subject as if it incarnates in an actual, individuated spatial structure (this egg) that, from then on, we cut abstractly from its becoming. We thereby reduce it to its actualized anatomical structure, without taking account of this virtual rheological potency, which leads from the first fertilized cell to the actualized individual, chick or serpent: “Subjectivity, contrary to the etymology, is without subject, it is just a character of any absolute form in the sense that it expresses the non-punctuality of the extended sensible” (Ruyer 1950, 64).

All agentive subjectivity differentiates itself in actualizing, in localizing itself spatio-temporally. The egg does not reduce to its actual cut; its dynamism insists on a trans-spatial mode (“non-punctuality of the extended”) since actualization continues from the first duplicated cell until the adult exiting the egg. It is this rheological transformation which Ruyer considers as finalized, sensate, and conscious. Virtual agency, therefore, overflows the actual and frames it through auto-survey. All consciousness is spatialized *in re* as soon as it is actualized—a result which marks the originality of Ruyer—even if it does not reduce to its spatial actualization *pied-à-terre*, and even though it cannot exist independently of it. Should this egg break, its differentiation immediately ceases in its actualization.

However, this differentiation, which Ruyer considers to be subjective, is declined in the mode of an absolute interiority: that of a meaningful activity, mnemonic and virtual, orienting this actual structure towards its future, chick or serpent. The vital, thus, by no means has a monopoly on subjectivity, since an atom or a virus equally displays this continuous operativity, heterogeneous and virtual, which qualifies subjectivity as subsistence. A virus or a molecule—water or benzene, equally possesses this ‘typical’ behaviour permitting them to ‘conserve’ their ‘mnemonic’ theme (staying water or benzene) through an improvisational transformation which Ruyer qualifies as “active and conquering perseverance” (2020, 38; translation modified). That this perseverance, to be active, must prove itself victorious, shows quite well the difficulty to which Ruyer makes us attentive: that of a subordination of the actual to the virtual, which is replayed in this new framework, the old refrain of the domination of the soul over its body.

Despite this, subjectivity does not refer to any pre-constituted entity, subject, or second consciousness to whom this field appears. It is not the attribute of a molar body, nor of a personalized soul, but a potential appetition. The “agentic” egg is not the actualized egg (molar individual) that I hold between my thumb and my index finger, but rather its il-localizable (virtual) active principle. It is thus an error to have a “punctualist” conception of subjectivity in the manner of the Leibnizian monads, metaphysical points of activity, since agency, which Ruyer defines as absolute interiority, is only realized by externalizing itself, by mounting functions, organs, mechanical relays. This is why work-activity is not punctual and ideal, but rather domanial and organizational.

Whence this disconcerting result, but one that is rigorous for a non-anthropocentric ecology: the behaviour of an atom is not solely positional or morpho-

logical in the manner of a mountain folding or a sedimentary deposit, regulated by closer-and-closer extremum laws; it is morphogenetic, not as a succession of structural states, but a suite of structuration behaviours: “The atom of carbon, and this is true of all other bodies, is not a structure” but “a structuring activity” (Ruyer, 2020, 59; translation modified).

It is this structuring activity that Ruyer names consciousness, and this explains why it cannot be localized in a brain-subject, since the mounting of such a centralized nervous system assumes by definition the agency of a primary consciousness. It is a subjectivity “without a subject-individual which would be the possessor of this consciousness” (Ruyer 2013, 46). In other words, the concept of a personal human subject—piloting its ship, an intentional consciousness to whom reality would appear—is the result of an unreflective anthropomorphism, the heir of theologies which place the human in a position of exception within nature.

We identify subjectivity with the reflexive, discursive act of our second consciousness, set in vigil, through an illusion that stems from our perception, as if a third and even a fourth psychic eye were required to “observe” our perception and read our cerebral monitors from the outside. But perception, *a fortiori* cerebral cognition, evinces a late relay from primary consciousness, catching up with its agency in multicellular organisms. It is not represented “to” a consciousness independent of itself; it is consciousness. Thus, as Ruyer observes, “the *image* is not seen, *it is, seen*” (2013, 48).

Primary consciousness (montage) is not localized in the brain (a mounted organ or second consciousness) since it arranges it. Every adult, Ruyer (2016, 75) states, “equipped with a brain was at first an embryo without a neural plate.” This is the striking argument—a true transcendental argument *in re*—that he sets against all abstract philosophy, which confounds virtual agency with its human actualization, and locates subjectivity exclusively in a realized subject, an “I-consciousness” with a brain. Such an I-consciousness is derived from this primary consciousness, distributed in an equipotential manner across each of the montages composing it. To deny this would be to deny all cellular respiration on the grounds that the cell does not possess small lungs! Whence Ruyer’s irresistible and playful argument, in which his contribution to transcendental philosophy properly consists: each embryologist is an ex-embryo (Ruyer 2020, 147; 2013, 41).

In effect, for example, for [René] Descartes to be able to write *Ego cogito...*, his embryo would have to ‘mount’ his brain, and the embryo did not have a brain to explain to it how to do so! The reflexivity of mental operations cannot render an account of this improvisatory but sensate activity, which Ruyer considers as a non-reflexive but formative intelligence (in the manner of an embryogenic tissue). The second consciousness constitutes nothing but a delayed relay, whether it be perceptive (all organisms endowed with a brain) or reflexive (language): it operates a re-singularization of the organic equipment, but holds its operativity, exactly like all embryonic tissue. If the Descartes embryo shows itself capable of mounting its own brain without needing a brain nor an assembly plan to explain to it how to do so, then all philosophy rests on this condition

and actualizes itself through the activity of a brain (second consciousness) that is itself agented by a primary, non-reflexive consciousness. It is this plan of determination through activation that philosophy systematically misunderstands.

Consequently, consciousness no longer defines itself through the usage of a human mental representation, encapsulated in words, since it implies the organizing survey of a primary consciousness possessed as much by an early Triton gastrula as by Descartes. Sense is thus act, not signification. It is not confined exclusively to the plane of noetic signification or anthropomorphic discursivity but acts through an axiological labour of realization before being actualized in linguistic or mental representation (Ruyer 2016, 13). It proves to be less *logos* than sensate activity—neither initially nor exclusively linguistic, nor established in the plane of reflective symbols nor the represented idealities of the human second consciousness. A word does not reduce to its actual pronunciation, nor to its printed sediment. Its virtual semantic consistency (its agency) is not caused by the semiotic agglomerates in which it is actualized, concatenations of phonemes or written symbols. Sense is not *logos*, speakable in the enunciations of the anthropomorphic second consciousness, but subjectivity which, as Ruyer (2013, 38) says, acts in auto-forming, which “self-acts.”

How in effect to set aside sense from significations? The Descartes-embryo has mounted his brain through immanent activity, without either manual or instructions for use, through stimuli-signals capable of responding to finalized evocations, that is, without orienting itself after significations which imply the designation of a sense through a sign. A non-semiotic linguistics puts itself in place such that sensate activities manifest long before the appearance of language. In terms of sense, embryology counts as much as linguistics, and reveals itself as sensate—‘sensifying’ Ruyer (1946, 59) proposes—more than ‘signifying’. Language doesn’t constitute just any example, since Ruyer (2013, 33) considers it “the only organ in which embryogenesis is collective.” —Is it truly the only one? Ruyer here comes close to collective transindividual agency, even if he does not pursue its analysis.

Colonial dominance or symbiosis?

If Ruyer thus delivers us from the anthropocentric politics of the cogito, he unfortunately reinstalls an amorphous, molar dualism between the domanial entities and their annexed functions. Consciousness is not only act (*unitas*); it is organizational (*multiplex*). How can it move from act to organization? Subjective multiplicities, conscious by auto-survey, do not actualize their agency except in mounting structures. At this turn of the analysis, rheological multiplicities only act because they annex the functioning through this “active and conquering perseverance,” already underscored, which implies not just the position of existence, nor the actualization of a virtual, but a domanial survey which Ruyer conceives from the start of his work as colonization: “Consciousness is not ‘*multiplex*’ except as operated by the ‘*unitas*’, [an] intentional consciousness of the primitive type” (2024, 139-40; translation modified).

What justifies the constrained and authoritarian character of this “encounter between a conscious theme and domesticated physical laws” (Ruyer 2024, 133;

translation modified) if the passage from *unitas* to *multiplex* is demanded by the agency of consciousness itself? According to Ruyer, consciousness—contrary to what Bergson posited—is not “a current.” On the contrary, “it is that which surveys and enframes the auxiliary mechanisms it mounts and arranges in a way that forces them to function according to its own axiological direction” (Ruyer 2024, 133; translation modified). So, how can we persist in confronting an absolute interiority to a subordinated exteriority in a binary manner? All consciousness is adversarially realized in a transitive manner: one colonizes outside oneself but also below oneself. For Ruyer, the political evidence of colonial expansion determines his concept of domanial survey, which: ‘forces’, ‘annexes’ aggregative assemblies conceived as strangers, subordinates, deprived of all agency. Domanial survey implements the political scheme of absolute interiority, transcendent to its domain of realization (*dominus*), even though, paradoxically, each differentiation implies an actualization through exteriorization, that is, neither through entropic disassembly, nor authoritarian subordination, but on the contrary, by mounting in complexity (negentropy).

So for Ruyer, therefore, agency remains eminent and separate: differentiation, conceived in this archetypal, non-differential mode, here flows into a colonial political model that persists throughout the course of his work: “Human beings will take over the planets of the solar system, driven by the same faith that animates the lichen taking over an old wall” (2024, 135). The lichen, however, as an alliance between an algae and a fungus, implies a very different model of symbiotic composition—one that is not hierarchical and subjugating (vertical), but rather heterogeneous and symbiotic (horizontal). The Belgian naturalist P.-J. Van Beneden noted [in *Les Commensaux et les parasites dans le règne animal*] (1875) that “we see animals which mutually provide services for one other. It seems unflattering to qualify them all as parasites or commensals” (qtd. in Perru 2011, 3). Ruyer remains insensitive to this mutualistic dimension, since he persists in holding agency as eminent, which thus renders him incapable of explaining how rheological multiplicities are differentiated by cascades of actualization. And yet, in two cases, that of second consciousness and that of language, Ruyer poses the possibility of an agentive recharging at the level of the composite, since primary consciousness does not ‘force’ secondary consciousness to ‘obey’ it, and language realizes an embryogenesis that is indeed collective. We must go further: if the lichen consists in the improbable encounter of two organisms from distinct kingdoms, individuality can no longer be expounded in a unitary mode, but consists in a composite totality, and it is thus the hierarchy of the ‘domanial’ which is found to be lacking. Ruyer agrees, moreover, since the individual, as we have seen, is never established at the actual plane of individuated samples (an egg), but at that of the species (a virtual mnemonic ideal) which orients actualization through survey. Yet, “the same hesitation between ‘being an individual’ and ‘being the organ of an individual’ is found everywhere in the organic domain” (Ruyer 2020, 95). In the case of lichen, we are rather dealing with a new organism in which the totality cannot be considered unitary, as it collectively recharges itself in individuality in a symbiotic, heterogeneous, and composite mode. Ruyer thus superimposes the transcendent ontological con-

ception of an individuated Dominus onto his interest in rheological processes, and politically regulates the relationship between the two multiplicities through the evidence of the colonial schema that was contemporary for him. If his refusal of human exceptionalism is an asset for contemporary philosophy, it is towards ecology that we must turn in order to ground the rheological differences in horizontal rather than vertical interactions, and to affirm the symbiotic—and no longer autopoietic—character of terrestrial differentiations.

Biographies

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Notes

1. See Bergson 1910, Chapter 2.
2. This word derives from the Greek prefix *rhéō*, which literally means to stream, or to flow continuously.
3. See also Sauvagnargues 2014.
4. See Sauvagnargues 2014.
5. This classic of embryology nourished not only Ruyer’s reflections but also those of Simondon and Deleuze.

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