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On the Politics of Life:
Michel Foucault and Georges Canguilhem on Life and Norms

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Dr Michael Ure & Prof. Miguel de Beistegui

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Monash University & The University of Warwick

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the trajectory of the concept of life in Michel Foucault’s work. Foucault famously claims that in the 18th and 19th centuries life became politicised. This politicisation of life, he argues, culminated in the formation of a distinctively modern ‘bio-political’ paradigm. This thesis develops a new interpretation of Foucault’s politics of life. To do so it shows that we can best interpret Foucault’s politics of life from the perspective of Georges Canguilhem’s philosophically informed histories of science. Foucault repeatedly acknowledged his theoretical, historical and contextual debt to Canguilhem, stressing the latter’s importance in shaping the intellectual and epistemological field in which he situated his own work. Following this lead, the thesis shows how Canguilhem’s historical analysis of medicine, physiology and pathology, especially his conceptions of vital normativity and norms, establish the parameters of Foucault’s analysis of the emergence of the notion of life in modern medicine, science and politics. Second, it argues that Canguilhem’s notions of norm and normativity enable us to connect the different moments of Foucault’s work on the politics of life as a coherent perspective. Third, and importantly, the thesis shows how this new interpretation of Foucault’s politics of life fatally undermines the common criticism that his work suffers from a normative deficit or has a “crypto-normative” character. Through Canguilhem’s concepts of norm and normativity, it demonstrates that the flipside of Foucault’s detailed descriptions of normalising power is a plausible account of normativity. By reading Foucault through the lens of a Canguilhem inspired framework, it reconceptualises normativity as a process of the creation of norms. To articulate a possible notion of normativity present in Foucault’s work, the thesis formulates and develops a concept of ‘alternormativity’. Rather than a type of anti-normativity, it demonstrates that Foucault’s politics of life turns on this notion of alternormativity or the creation of new norms and ways of life in the context of biopolitical governmentality.
Une idée ne peut servir deux fois. Quelque brillante qu’elle soit, il faut dans la suite l’appliquer, c’est-à-dire la déformer, la changer, l’approcher d’une nouvelle chose, la conformer à une nouvelle chose. Toujours chercher, donc, et ne jamais réciter.
— Alain, Vigiles de l’esprit, 1942.

Forming concepts is a way of living and not a way of killing life; it is a way to live in a relative mobility and not a way to immobilise life...
Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.
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Finally, I would like to thank Gilberto and Angela for their care and support.
Abbreviations

Works by Georges Canguilhem


I will also provide quotes from the French original: Le normal et le pathologique. 12° édition. Paris: PUF, 2013. I indicate in footnotes when I retranslate or refer to the French original.

NBP  “Note sur la situation faite en France à la philosophie biologique”, Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale, 52° année, No. 4-3, 1947, 322-332.


Works by Michel Foucault

The following editions of Foucault’s works are used in this thesis, unless otherwise noticed. When I revisit or retranslate French original passages, I flag that in the footnotes.


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Introduction

Foucault, Canguilhem and the Power of Life

Life is more and more the terrain of our ethical and political debates and dilemmas, as well as the territory of artistic, scientific and technological creation and intervention. In terms of social and political concerns, issues such as race and racism, epidemics, health and demography policies, migrations, euthanasia and assisted reproduction – and many other key concerns of our time, all have as a common denominator the issue of life, mechanisms and strategies of protecting, managing, enhancing and taking care of life. Diametrically opposed positions on most of our political issues rely on the notion of life and presuppose a prise de position for life (even if it is not clear whose life and at what cost). In this ambiguous context, different actors and institutions claim to be ‘defending’, ‘affirming’ and ‘protecting life’. From the emergence of hygienist health policies in the eighteenth century to modern genetic technologies and biomedicine as well as the rise of bioethics, passing through the totalitarian eugenic and genocidal experiences of the twentieth century, we note the ever-increasing concern of power with the “life biology” of its subjects. Our politics is the politics of the living.

We could say that “we seem to have reached a moment in history where every distinction and opposition is made no longer in relation to life, but within it, and where life is a problem inextricably theoretical and practical, ontological and political”. Life seems to be, to borrow the famous Sartrean expression, “the unsurpassable horizon of our time”. Philosophically, we problematise and dispute epistemological, ethical and political issues concerning life from the paradoxical place we occupy as living beings. Being alive does not simply mean to exist, but to participate in something which is known, objectified and governed. To the extent to which we count ourselves among the living, posing the question of life leads to a sort of limit experience, that of questioning and problematising that which grounds our existence, that which is the condition of possibility for the very act of questioning. Even if, according to Foucault, the concept of life emerges with the examination

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1 See DE2, text 257.
4 Sartre uses that expression in 1957 in *Questions de Méthode*, later republished, in 1960, in the Preface to the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, referring to Marxism. He says “je considère le marxisme comme l’indépassable philosophie de notre temps”. The phrase is quoted in Beistegui, Blanco, Gracieuse, *The Care of Life*, 13.
and observation of corpses, we cannot simply ‘step out’ of life in order to look back at it objectively. What presents itself, then, is a sort of redoublement of life: on the one hand, a life which we interrogate, a life upon which we act, a life we fight for, a life we manage; on the other hand, its double, a life which makes every interrogation, every action and every struggle possible, which therefore occupies the paradoxical position of a transcendental. In addition to that, as I will argue when reading the work of French philosopher Georges Canguilhem, being alive also implies a series of normative positions, choices, and evaluations: and we interrogate, know and experience life from within these normative positions which constitute our life.

This is valid not only in terms of the political shaping of individual and collective life, but also to the possibility of knowledge of life. Knowledge, here, is not a neutral approach to an object, but addresses our very condition and the fact that we are alive – which presupposes a stance of evaluation and normativity. Life is also an ethical and existential domain of interrogation. As Canguilhem explains in “Logique du vivant et histoire de la biologie”, “outside of the laboratory (…) love, birth and death continue to propose to living beings, sons of order and chaos, the immemorial figures of those questions that the science of life no longer poses to life”.

If, according to Canguilhem, the science that emerged from it no longer interrogates life in its experiments and its laboratories, it is also true that life remains a problem and a question for us, the living. More and more, it seems that the problem of governing living beings, managing life and its process is no longer separable of the question on how to live – for the ways powers, states, forms of knowledge intervene in our material, bodily existence are mediated by norms, forms and prescriptions on how to live one’s life. And the same is valid for the interpellation and the critique of these forms of intervention, normalisation and prescription. Not only is the analysis and critique of the ways in which our lives are managed and governed accompanied by the question of how to live differently – and of a life that would not be managed, controlled and governed in this way – but the act of critique itself seems to be accompanied by a reflection on life. In this sense, speaking, thinking and acting from within life seems to mean that the very critical gesture is in itself directed towards life, it interpellates life: the norms, laws and rules that structure the ways in which our lives are managed and governed.

See BC, Chapter 8.

governed and shaped, the ways in which power acts upon or within life, the ways in which we chose to live and organise collective life.

Moreover, if it is true that Canguilhem points to the contemporary disappearance, in the life sciences, of a conceptualisation and an inquiry on life itself, we must ask if the relevance of thinking about life today is not related to the fact that, perhaps, life has *come back* into the scientific debates of our times: genetic technologies, researches on the DNA and the genome, biotechnology, as well as forms of generating life artificially seem to characterise our epoch – and the repercussion of this *turn to life* and to the manipulation and creation of life in the sciences is the constitution and rapid growth of the field of bioethics, highlighting the ethical, moral and political implications of this new stage in the manipulation of life. Therefore, if life is existentially and ethically relevant to us outside of the laboratory, it seems, on the other hand, to be once more relevant within scientific investigation.

In this context of the modern politicisation of life, in which the management and regulation of biological processes and the contestation over different ways of life seem inseparable, can we still subscribe to those modern readings of the ancient Greek distinction between the realm of pure, bare life (*zoē*) in opposition to the qualified life, and that of the ethical form of life (*bios*)? Is government based on a certain configuration of *bios* or does it penetrate the very domain of biological life processes, that of *zoē*?

Maintaining this clear-cut distinction would be the same as to divide reality in two different ontological regions: that of biological life and that of politics, as if life’s initiative, agency and innovation could only be found in the second domain whereas the first would be a merely passive or reactive one; as if the former were a domain of monotonous repetition of merely automatic processes and the second one the domain of invention and creativity. The domain of the ethical and political life, transcending or being added to the domain of the *mere* fact of life, would be the realm of action, of rights, of law and of morality. The domain of mere or bare animal life would be a domain of unqualified passivity, survival, conservation and repetition.

This seems to be the case in the works of important contemporary political thinkers. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, seems to subscribe to this distinction, when she

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analyses a set of different forms of life and of human activity: labour, work, and action. In these different levels we see a passage from a merely conservative form of life focused on survival and fulfilling organic needs to a qualified form of life, in which freedom is employed and in which men find a realm of accomplishment and transcendence. Agamben’s distinction between a bare life and a form of life seems to address that which he considers the key traits of modern politics. In a different line, but still preserving the *bios–zoe* distinction, Foucault scholars also seem to have read Foucault’s work in this very key.  

This thesis seeks to challenge this distinction, in two ways. First, it reconstructs Foucault’s work from the perspective of his concept of life and, specifically, of his account of the politicisation of life. Second, it reconstructs Canguilhem’s analyses of life in the formation of medicine (physiology and pathology), then proposing the network of concepts which is possible to extract from these analyses as a framework read Foucault’s work.

First, the developments in biopolitics since Foucault suggest that beyond and alongside the domain of law and judicial institutions, and the traditional political concepts related to it (‘legal subject’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘representation’, ‘rights’), we find the domain of biological, organic life, politicised and encompassed by the interplay of social norms. That is, we find the consideration of and intervention upon people’s bodies and the health of populations at the centre of contemporary political concerns. From this perspective, since the advent of bio-power, government is not only of citizens and subjects, but also of populations and living bodies.

In this politicisation of life, our very biological life, once considered a part of the realm of nature and determination – by contrast to the free realm of human ethical and political action – is fully invested in processes of government and administration. If the human being was described in Western philosophical tradition since Aristotle as a *zoon politikon*, a certain category of animal whose life, or whose biological life, was superseded by the different level of political life; the modern notion of biopolitics depicts our very

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9 For example, Manuel Mauer seems to believe that Foucault would have looked for the Greek concept of *bios* as an alternative and a response to the modern reduction of life to *zoe*. Mauer, *Foucault et le problème de la vie*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne 2015, 202.
11 In this sense, the political would be a specificity of the kind of soul (or animating principle) that human beings have. In modernity, this hierarchical model, which goes from the simplest forms of vegetative life to the most complex forms until reaching reason and humanity reappear in the philosophical anthropologists such as Max Scheler. See *The Human Place in the Cosmos*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009.
biological nature as an object of political conflict, of political action and government. Rather than animals who are also political (or to whose animality the political is added as a new layer or *stratum* in the hierarchy of being), in the biopolitical paradigm our very animality becomes the territory of the political. Following this line of thought, we seem not to find anywhere this realm of pure life, of the *mere* biological fact of life – the myth of a life given beyond or outside the polemic and political constitution of norms. If this very ‘fact’ of biological life is at the centre of our political debates, then perhaps we could say that it is only through a certain ideological conception of life, that it could appear to us as removed from polemics and conflict, as part of a necessary, stable and homeostatic order of things.\(^{12}\)

Behind this view of life and nature, there is a normative evaluation and that which we could call a “philosophy of order”.\(^{13}\) As my thesis will discuss, this view of a homeostatic and pure accomplished fact of life seems to reveal more about our own normative projections and social values when understanding life, than it reveals about life itself.\(^ {14}\)

If there is no outside, no exterior to power and government in the biopolitical paradigm, this expansion and deepening of the possibilities of governing life (even animal, or so-called ‘bare’ biological life) could be considered one of the distinctive aspects of modern politics.\(^ {15}\) Our politics places our living being in question. As Michel Foucault wrote in 1976, “For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question”.\(^ {16}\) Foucault names this transformation of power and politics a “biopolitics of the population”, which would operate simultaneously and complementarily to an “anatomopolitics of the individuals”.\(^ {17}\)

This famous quote from Foucault seem to indicate that, for us and in our time, there is no possible separation between the fact that we are alive, on the one hand, and politics, on the other. Our very biological existence and survival is at stake in political action. In this sense, we must situate a whole series of conceptualisations that Foucault proposed before his appropriation of the (already existing) notion of biopolitics.\(^ {18}\) Foucault’s investigation on

\(^{12}\) As we will discuss, this is Canguilhem’s argument in IR. This is also highlighted by Le Blanc in *Canguilhem et les normes*. Paris: Vrin, 2015, 37, 49.

\(^{13}\) Le Blanc, *Canguilhem et les normes*, 36-37.

\(^{14}\) See Chapter 4.

\(^{15}\) See Chapters 6-8.

\(^{16}\) WK, 143.

\(^{17}\) WK, 143.

\(^{18}\) Esposito shows how the notion of ‘biopolitics’ preceded Foucault’s use of the term. When proposing the concept of bio-power Foucault does not refer to the previous uses of the term, perhaps because he thought this concept as a sort of historiographical category in which we could situate the previous
biopolitics shows how the political horizon has established itself as the territory outside of
which we no longer can think or experience life; conversely, we can no longer think politics
‘outside’ of life and its dynamics.

Through an inquiry on Foucault’s works on the politicisation of life, this thesis seeks
not only to articulate the concept of life underlying contemporary experience as described
and analysed by his foundational studies, but also to constitute a philosophical
understanding of life and its power of creation, invention, variation, errancy and
experimentation. In order to do that, I will read the Foucauldian ideas of biopolitics and
subjectivation through the lens of Canguilhem’s work. These two tasks – that of articulating
and clarifying the idea of life underlying the modern experience of politics and that of
understanding life philosophically in its power of variation and creation – to a certain extent,
coincide: articulating the notion of life underlying biopolitics also means shedding light on its
potentialities.

Not only is Canguilhem one of Foucault’s sources, or at least part of a constellation
of authors with whom he thinks. Canguilhem’s philosophy can also provide insight into
Foucault’s work. In this sense, the question which propels my investigation is that of how to
read – and what are the potential and changes of perspective offered by a reading of
Foucault with Canguilhem. This question can be translated into a methodological concern:
what does Canguilhem allows us to see in Foucault’s work once we look at it through the
notion of life, and more specifically, a philosophy of life and norms? What heuristic and
hermeneutical insight can our reading of Foucault with and via Canguilhem produce? The
methodological question goes beyond a merely exegetical task; it is also a question of the
philosophical effects this reading operates: what emerges, philosophically, out of this
encounter? This second methodological concern could be, then, translated into a question
of philosophical creation: the articulation of a philosophy of life and the norms of life,
emerging from a reading of Foucault with Canguilhem, and one which is not only an exegesis
of these authors.

In this sense, not only does my thesis propose an interpretation of Foucault through
the conceptual and philosophical framework that could be articulated through the reading
of Canguilhem. It also proposes, as Pierre Macherey19 suggested in his pioneering work, to

usages of the term that were positive in the sense that they were political propositions. And these
political propositions could be situated in the attempts of conceptualising new forms of political
management of life. See Esposito, Bios.
read Foucault *with* Canguilhem, and, more specifically in our enquiry, to think the problem of life *with* Foucault and Canguilhem.\textsuperscript{20} As Philippe Sabot explained,\textsuperscript{21} to think *with* (penser avec) as not the same as to think *of* or to think *about* a certain thing (penser à).\textsuperscript{22} As he explains, for Macherey, to think *with* Foucault does not mean trying to say what Foucault thought or could have thought, but to undertake the movement of his thought and the movement it proposes. On the other hand, to think *of* Foucault with Canguilhem, differently from tracing influences and finding a school of thought, would rather mean producing an encounter between these two universes of thought and, to look at the thought of the one from the perspective of that of the other, reversing these perspectives in a dramatic interplay. Following the path opened by Macherey, this exercise will be here realised especially referring to the concepts of life and norms. In this sense, my research is less an enquiry on the methodological centrality of Bachelard, Koyré, Cavaillès and Canguilhem and historical epistemology to the constitution of Foucault’s archaeology, and more an exploration of certain common themes in Canguilhem and Foucault, using one as a lens to look at the other’s work. As Vázquez-García proposes, we should explore a new priority, a new focus, in the research on the links between Canguilhem and Foucault, namely “the ontological and ethico-political links between the two philosophical projects” and the “affinities and divergences (...) regarding the concepts of social and vital norm; the implication of both in the genesis of the concept of ‘biopolitics’ and, finally, the importance of the notion of life in both trajectories”.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20} A good illustration of this procedure is expressed by Macherey in the ‘Avant-Propos’, where he gives us an account of his investigation on the philosophy of norms in Foucault’s work through a reference to Spinoza and, more specifically, to a reading of Foucault with Spinoza: “du moins, semblait-il, cela pouvait avoir un sens de lire ensemble Foucault et Spinoza, non pour les assimiler l’un à l’autre, ce qui eût été absurd, mais pour essayer de mettre en place et de faire fonctionner une relation d’échange entre ces deux mondes de pensée qui se rencontraient ” (De Canguilhem à Foucault, 29). Macherey also explains how this reading together creates new perspectives on the authors we read, as it did for him with regard to the theoretical encounters and perspectives produced in the reading of Foucault, Canguilhem, Spinoza and Marx: “il s’agissait, en relisant Canguilhem et Foucault à la lumière de Spinoza et de Marx, d’effectuer simultanément l’opération inverse qui consistait à relire Spinoza et Marx à la lumière de Canguilhem e de Foucault” (15). The operation I propose in this thesis is analogous: reading Foucault on the light of Canguilhem and Nietzsche, and exchange perspectives in the encounter produced between these authors, to read one from the perspective the thought of the other generates.

\textsuperscript{21} Sabot, “De Foucault à Macherey, penser les normes”, Methodos, 16, 2016.

\textsuperscript{22} Sabot writes: “Penser avec, cela s’entend plutôt comme la prise de contact avec sa propre pensée à travers celle d’un autre qui en déclenche la possibilité, qui en impulse le mouvement, sans que ce mouvement soit nécessairement finalisé, pré-orienté par son point d’appui initial” (“De Foucault à Macherey, penser les normes”, 1).

\textsuperscript{23} Vázquez-García, “Canguilhem, Foucault y la ontología política del vitalismo”. Logos, 2015, Vol.48, 168. My translation; same is valid for all texts originally in foreign languages and quoted in English.
Therefore, the task of interpretation, of understanding and reconstructing Foucault’s text and discourse inscribing it within an internal movement of thought, will be accompanied by the attempt to produce an encounter with Canguilhem in the philosophical investigation on the issue of life and norms. If, as Le Blanc claims, to talk about life means to talk about norms,24 what can Foucault and Canguilhem offer to a philosophy of norms and life? What notions of life and norms can we extract from this philosophical experiment of their interaction?25

In other words, this research gravitates around the philosophical attempt to offer a reconstruction of Foucault’s research that draws on Canguilhem (and on Nietzsche as an intercessor, as an element of articulation and as a means to produce connections between them), with two main goals in mind. First, to identify and elaborate a possible underlying philosophical concept of life and to ask how it runs through and in some ways unifies and motivates Foucault’s main political and ethical concerns. Or, putting it differently, the question would be how can a philosophy of norms and of life – a critical biophilosophy26 – help us in the task of articulating Foucault’s philosophy and ethos as, simultaneously, an attentive diagnosis and a radical critique of the present, of who we are in the present and the practices and institutions that we enact in our present. The second goal would be to produce an understanding of life through the notion of norm. This second aim follows Canguilhem’s diagnosis in “Note sur la situation faite en France a la philosophie biologique” and represents an attempt to contribute to the constitution of a biophilosophy of the future, that is, a philosophy that, differently from a philosophy of biology (a reflection on the methods, conceptual end epistemological structure of biological science), would put “life at the centre of our experience”.27

My specific contribution to Foucault scholarship consists in reconstructing Foucault’s research on normalisation from the viewpoint of Canguilhem’s philosophy of norms, and in articulating an ethical and political notion of normativity. In the context of Foucault’s work,

24 “L’analyse philosophique de la vie ne peut se faire qu’à partir du concept de norme” ; “Le concept de norme revoie inévitablement à l’idée de vie” (Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 7).
25 Sabot explains Macherey’s approach when reading Foucault by stressing that this reading would not have the “circular character of an interpretation (which maintains a certain order of discourse)”, neither would it simply consist in acquiring a “knowledge (connaissance) of a given, readymade content” which would be there ready to “be absorbed”. It would rather be that of the encounter, that is an “invitation to engage [oneself] in a process of problematisation” (“De Foucault à Macherey, penser les normes”, 2).
26 See NPB; Beistegui, Bianco, Gracieuse, The Care of Life, 7.
this word immediately refers to the changes in the modes of functioning of power and to the
notions of normal, normality, normalisation. It refers to what could be called the “force of
norms”. To speak of normativity in Foucault’s work means also to refer to another polemic
encounter, that of Foucault and Critical Theory, especially in the figure of Jürgen Habermas
and Nancy Fraser, who open up a debate later taken up by Axel Honneth, Martin Saar and
others. If, on the one hand, important figures in Critical Theory, such as Honneth and Saar
currently and gradually move away from aspects of their original position as well as from
some of the main aspects of Habermas’ criticism of Foucault’s normative deficit, my thesis
will also reopen and reassess the normativity debate in its Habermasian formulation. The
reconsideration of Habermas’ and Fraser’s critiques will open a space for investigating the
possibilities and limits that the reference to Canguilhem could introduce in terms of
rethinking that debate and the position of Foucault’s work within it. This will provides us with
the opportunity to rethink the concept of normativity, inviting us to redefine or describe
Foucault’s critical ethos. Why and in which sense is Foucault’s work critical? Attempting to
answer to this question seems to be a necessary task, since the actual engagements in
dialogue between Foucault and the Critical Theorists are very rare – despite the former’s
sympathy for Adorno, Horkheimer and the so-called first generation of the Frankfurt School –
and the debate mostly developed after Foucault’s death on the side of Critical Theory.
Additionally, though a discussion of the genesis of the concept of vital normativity in the
early Canguilhem, I will stress the importance of Kant. This emphasis will contribute to a
better understanding of convergences and divergences between Foucault (understood
through the framework of Canguilhem) and Critical Theory, as well as to situate Canguilhem
in the perspective of what could be called critical philosophy.

28 See Macherey, De Canguilhem à Foucault.
2003.
31 See, for instance, DE2, texts 330 and 339. In the long interview with Duccio Trombadori (DE2, text
281) in 1980, Foucault says that his interest on the Frankfurt School was triggered by his reading of
Kirchheimer on the mechanisms of punishment in the context of the United States. Indeed, the
attentive reader of Foucault will find Kirchheimer as a main reference in DP, 24: “Rusche and
Kirchheimer’s great work, Punishment and Social Structures, provides a number of essential reference
points”.
32 Foucault himself suggests that the school of Canguilhem, Bachalard, Koyré – the histoire des sciences
– represented, in France, a similar effort to that of the Frankfurt in the constitution of a critical history
of reason. According to him, bridges between these two traditions could have been built around the
idea of a “histoire de la rationalité”. See DE2, text 330.
Although Foucault sought to free political practice from the authority of theory and its forms of veridiction, it is important to show the relevance and strength of Foucault’s ethical and political position for current ethical and political debates, once we understand this position from the perspective of Canguilhem’s notion of normativity. Drawing on Canguilhem’s conceptual apparatus into our analysis helps us visualise the political and ethical gesture underlying Foucault’s philosophical critique of the present. This conceptual apparatus will be a key element in the formulation of an interpretation of Foucault’s critique of power based on the distinction between normalisation and normativity. As we will see, Foucault formulates the concept of normalisation as an explicit appropriation of Canguilhem’s research. In this sense, I will explore the concept of norm not only to the extent to which it expresses and explains Foucault’s analysis of power dispositifs, but also how it clarifies Foucault’s critical ethos and how it could be mobilised to understand the dynamics of resistance as well as the role and place of the intellectual (philosopher, historian of the present, or genealogist) within social struggles. Could the elucidation of the place of the intellectual in relation to social movements and struggles from the perspective of a renewed idea of normativity clarify Foucault’s idea and practice of critique?

A reading of Foucault’s text, “Life: Experience and Science”, will be essential in the task of exploring the intersection between Foucault and Canguilhem. I will privilege this text as an effective means to produce repercussions and changes in the way we read Foucault. The procedure will be, first, to analyse the way Foucault reads Canguilhem and, then, to read Foucault from the point of view this very reading generates. In other words, I will apply the conceptual apparatus that Foucault develops in his study on Canguilhem as a tool to read his own work. Additionally, the study of this particular text, in which Foucault offers a commentary on Canguilhem’s work, will be fundamental in the task of introducing a concept of error or errancy, as well as an understanding of norms and normativity in the perspective of variation and experimentation. These ways of relating to (as well as creating) norms will be then used as a key to read Foucault’s analysis of discipline and biopower, on the one hand, and his reading of what I will call the ancient “biotechniques”, on the other. Why is the apparently descriptive procedure Foucault mobilises in his reading of the ancients, especially in his lecture courses, fully consistent with a critical history of the present and a critical ontology of the ourselves? How does the introduction of a network of concepts deriving from

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33 This is clear in texts such as “Intellectuals and Power” (DE1, text 106) and “Useless to Revolt?” (DE2, text 269). Reconstructing Foucault’s idea of critique means to reconstruct the concrete way in which he saw the role of the intellectual in relation to movements of contestation and social struggles.  
34 DE2, text 361; EW2, 465-478.
Canguilhem operate a hermeneutical change in the way we read Foucault’s engagement with the ancient biotecniques? In order to work towards providing a new possible answer to these questions, I will mobilise the idea of a history of norms, and a history of our normative capacity.

Finally, in this analysis of the idea of life and its relations to norms and normativity, the notions of sickness and health will play an important role. If Foucault and Canguilhem attempt to problematise the notions of sickness and pathology, it is particularly through an analysis of the notion of sickness, of the experience of illness that we discover one of the fundamental aspects of the relation between life and norms. In the experience of sickness, we discover what Canguilhem calls the ‘polarity’ of life, and its capacity for active experimentation and creation of norms. Sickness is seen as a crisis in which life experiences the negative but, at the same time, it is seen as the opportunity for health: that is, the opportunity for the creation of new values and forms of life. Falling ill is, for Canguilhem (as it is for Nietzsche), an experience of our normative capacity and the plasticity of our forms of living. Finally, it is my hypothesis that an analysis of Canguilhem’s notion of sickness (read from a Nietzschean viewpoint) can serve as a model to think the problem of subjectivity and subjectivation in Foucault’s thought, as well as unfolds something of key importance for his understanding of genealogy. What is the role of genealogy in terms of the creation of norms? How can the experience of sickness help us clarifying this role?

As Nietzsche suggests in the Preface for the Second Edition of the Gay Science, “for a psychologist, there are few questions that are as attractive as that concerning the relations of health and philosophy, and if he should become ill, he will bring all of his scientific curiosity into his illness”.\textsuperscript{35} The philosopher should become sick, and philosophy would then be an “art of transfiguration”, of “traversing many states of health”,\textsuperscript{36} experimenting under the conditions of severe sickness, and returning from it as “newborn”.\textsuperscript{37} As we will see, Nietzsche’s conception of sickness could be described as an opportunity for deeply understanding values and ways of life. This conception is similar to Canguilhem’s, to whom sickness is not the absence of norms, but rather a way to understand the normative aspects of life. In a very Nietzschean sense, Canguilhem understands “falling ill” as a “luxury”. According to Le Blanc, sickness “pushes life to understand itself as the creation of norms”.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, 35.
\textsuperscript{37} Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, 37.
\textsuperscript{38} “La maladie (...) pousse la vie à se comprendre comme création des normes”. (Le Blanc, \textit{Canguilhem et les normes}, 8).
As Canguilhem writes in the introduction of *The Normal and the Pathological*, “it is in pathology that we unravel the teachings of health, rather as Plato sought in the institutions of the State the larger and more easily readable equivalent of the virtues and vices of the individual soul”.\(^{39}\) In this analysis, I will mobilise the notion of crisis, the origin of which is medical, yet omnipresent today in the political sphere.

In this exploration of the notion of sickness, however, we need to exercise caution. As Susan Sontag proposed in *Illness as Metaphor*, we must be cautious in order not to perpetuate the metaphors of sickness and the social valorisations they presuppose. Sontag thinks of illness as “the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship”, and she thinks it is necessary not to reproduce the “punitive and sentimental fantasies concocted about that situation”.\(^{40}\) Sontag’s effort is that of analysing the mythologies of sickness (especially cancer and tuberculosis), showing a whole imaginary production of stigma and, paradoxically, positive valorisation. In our analysis of sickness, we will bear in mind Sontag’s critical advice, as well as that of Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain* character Settembrini, who advises his friend and disciple Hans Castorp: we must take care not to reify disease and death as principles, thinking the stagnation in sickness as a source of moral nobility.

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Part I explores the problem of life in Foucault’s work, as well as the relation between Foucault and Canguilhem. My first chapter, “Problematising Life” gravitates around the question of how to read Foucault’s work. It proposes a particular way of reading, which I characterise through what I call a “continuist hypothesis”, built up upon a network of concepts in which the notion of life and of norm play a key role. The main insight the chapter puts forward is the following: if we focus on the notion of life, setting it as the perspective from which we look at Foucault’s work, we visualise different forms of continuity in terms of the problems guiding his research. After critically engaging with ternary divisions and periodisation of Foucault’s work, which identify three relatively autonomous moments, separated by moments of silence and reformulation, I propose an analysis of the different points of emergence of life. By highlighting the differences and singularities of each of these moments,

\(^{39}\) NP, 43.  
I emphasise, however, the way in which following the thread of life can guide us through Foucault’s work. In my account, two points of emergence of the notion play a key role. First, the politicisation of life in biopolitics and discipline, when the living body becomes the main terrain of politics in its individual and collective forms of being.

The second point of emergence is Foucault’s engagement with the notion of bios, especially in Hellenistic and Roman philosophy. Now, Foucault is mainly preoccupied with active forms in which we create ways of life and forms of living. If biopower established technologies over life, Foucault shows how, in a very different way, the ancients created what he calls “biotechniques”. The chapter investigates the continuities and discontinuities between these two notions, without however accepting the easy conclusion of their radical opposition (as if, biopower meant only oppression and the expansion of power over a life deprived of ethical form, and the ancient ways of life meant only resistance, a fully free attribution of form to life, which we could mobilise as the ‘other’ of biopower).

In Chapter 2, I follow the line of research that emerges in a letter Foucault sent to Canguilhem in 1965. In this letter, Foucault thinks of his research as grounded in Canguilhem’s work, without however being able to precisely articulate this relationship between the two projects. My hypothesis is that an attempt to answer to the questions the letter raises can be found in the 1978 text “Life: Experience and Science”, in two different ways. The first is Foucault’s view regarding Canguilhem’s role in the definition of the French intellectual and philosophical field in the Post-War; the second, Canguilhem’s contribution for a renewal of the philosophical enquiry on subjectivity. Finally, in order to further clarify the relations between the two philosophers, I critically revisit the main way in which the Foucault-Canguilhem encounter has been articulated in scholarship, namely through the idea of a methodological affiliation and a belonging to the French tradition of historical epistemology. After critically assessing the main claims of this interpretive line, I propose a reading of the relation between Foucault and Canguilhem beyond the history of science and historical epistemology. My contention is that Canguilhem’s importance for Foucault goes beyond a methodological ‘influence’.

Part II explores Canguilhem’s work from a philosophical and political perspective. After having challenged the reading that sees in Canguilhem fundamentally a historian of science, I propose to read Canguilhem as a ‘philosopher’. In Chapter 3, I revisit Canguilhem’s intellectual and political trajectory, showing how it is as a young philosopher and activist that he develops his interest in medicine and the history of science. In this chapter, I emphasise...
Canguilhem’s relation to Alain and a particular French reception of Kant, on the one hand, and his political engagement and antifascism, on the other. In this context, I present Canguilhem’s thought as a philosophy of resistance and a critique of the ‘accomplished fact’. Additionally, by revealing Canguilhem’s philosophical intention in the study of medicine, I set the grounds for a philosophical reading of the *Normal and the Pathological*, developing concepts that will contribute to a reading of Foucault *with* Canguilhem.

In Chapter 4, I present the key ideas Canguilhem develops in his 1943 medicine thesis, as well as some of its philosophical and ethical implications. My exposition is done in two steps. First, it presents Canguilhem’s refutation of what he calls the “quantitative” thesis concerning the nature of the pathological (*pars destruens*), stressing concepts that can help us reading Foucault’s ideas of normalisation. Second, it presents the “qualitative” view of the pathological, showing how it serves as a site for the formulation of some of Canguilhem’s main concepts (*pars construens*). My reading emphasises the social and political implications of Canguilhem’s critique of the quantitative thesis as a philosophy of order which reproduces the cult of the accomplished fact. In my reading of the qualitative view, I stress the notion of pain and the experience of negativity by the sick person as signs of what Canguilhem sees as the emergence of a qualitatively different way of life in disease. Finally, through a discussion on vital norms and technique, I prepare the grounds for an analysis of the key concept of “vital normativity”.

Chapter 5 develops this notion, distinguishing it from other experiences of the norm, such as normalisation. I then analyse the importance of the experience of disease as an experimentation of norms. In the experience of disease, the activity of vital normativity as well as the functioning of the norm become clearer to us. Through the notion of disease, I also present an understanding of normalisation as the crystallisation and the fixation in the framework of norms that have lost their dynamism and capacity for change. The experience of disease teaches us that life is spoken of in many ways, all of which refer to norms. I then attempt at articulating Canguilhem’s notion of health, which I understand from the perspective of a Nietzschean tragic insight: health appears as polemical, agonistic activity, a never-ending task, which exceeds any particular state of health and is defined by the very capacity to fall ill and recover, by the permanent effort of convalescence through normativity. In Canguilhem’s notion of health, we will also find a political idea of the necessity to challenge any given norm in the name of the possibility of the creation of new modes of being. Finally, I explore possible analogies between disease and subjectivation from the perspective of the norm.
In Part III, having acquired fundamental concepts from our reading of Canguilhem, I propose to return to an analysis of the power of norm in Foucault. In Chapter 6, I revisit Canguilhem’s analysis of social norms, as well as a sociological and historiographical hypothesis he puts forward in the 1966 addendum to the *Normal and the Pathological*, namely: a generalised process of normalisation and standardisation in society. This hypothesis is particularly important for Foucault. In this discussion, I explore Canguilhem’s insight of human *plasticity*, related to a reading of the historical and geographical coordinates of the norm, which stresses the fundamental contingency of collective norms and ways of life. If the notion of vital normativity focused on the experimental and creative dimension of norms, Canguilhem’s social analysis of the norm focuses on the production of normality through forms of standardisation of social practices.

Chapter 7, reconstructs Foucault’s appropriation of Canguilhem’s view of normalisation in the context of a reformulation of the notion of power, showing how Foucault further politicises and extends Canguilhem’s insight to the domain of sexuality and the living body. In addition to the normalisation of forms of knowledge, grammar, technology and industrial production, Foucault identifies a power of normalisation over the living body. It is in relation to Canguilhem’s work that Foucault articulates, in *Abnormal*, the notion of a positive power which operates through norms, and sets up the framework for an “archaeology of normalising power”. Additionally, in dialogue with Macherey, in this chapter I discuss some of the philosophical and theoretical implications of the notion of norm.

In Chapter 8, I analyse some of the figures and historical instantiations of a power that operates through norms in Foucault’s work. I focus on three main textual places: the birth of the asylum in the *History of Madness*, the advent of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish*, and the constitution of a normalising society in the framework of biopolitics, especially in the *Will to Knowledge* (as well as in *Society Must be Defended*). My hypothesis in this chapter is that the norm is a form of power without exterior, and one that presupposes freedom. Although this conceptual scheme already appears in some passages of the *History of Madness*, I contend that the idea of a normalising power, of a power that operates through the norm, depends on another conceptual and historical acquisition: the notion of life.\footnote{Paul Patton underlines the importance of the notion of freedom explicitly acquires for what he sees as a transition from a war-based model of power exercise to a governmental model which takes place in Foucault’s lectures between 1977 and 1979. Patton highlights Foucault’s idea of an “integration of freedom into the art of government”, which is especially clear in his analysis of the problem of grain shortage in the 18 January 1978 lecture (STP, 35-44). As Patton explains, grain shortage “was a threat to governments since it could lead quickly to revolt on the part of the population deprived of food.”}
Finally, if in the previous chapters of Part III, I have focused on the experience of the norm as normalisation, in Chapter 9, I explore a different way of conceiving the norm and our relation to it, investigating how Canguilhem’s notion of *normativity* can open new perspectives in terms of an active creation and performance of norms, especially in the context of what Foucault called the *arts of living* or the *biotechniques*. In my reading, there are fundamentally two ways in which we could relate Foucault’s work to Canguilhem’s notion of normativity: the first is a reading of Foucault’s research on the ancient philosophical ways of life as a chapter of a history of norms, seen from the perspective of the creation and active engagement with norms. The second is a reformulation of Foucault’s idea of critique and critical ethos, and a different way to situate the question of normativity in critical activity, focusing on what I will call ‘alternormativity’ and a ‘political art of listening’.

Previously it had been dealt with by regulations intended to prevent such shortages”. From the end of the seventeenth century onwards, free circulation of grain and the removal of restrictions on commerce and production becomes the method employed to avoid shortage. What is important here is the emergence of a particular form of power exercise, a new governmentality based a certain use of freedom – namely, a “liberal” governmentality. As Patton explains: “Liberal government did not simply endorse freedom but established limitations, controls, and various forms of coercion to ensure the kinds of freedom needed for the effective operation of markets” (Patton, “From Resistance to Government. Foucault’s Lectures 1976-1979”, in *A Companion to Foucault*, eds. C. Falzon, T. O’Leary & J. Sawicki. Malden-Oxford: Blackwell, 2013, 182-183). It is important to stress that, although the lectures of BB and STP could provide more detailed analyses of the relations between power and freedom, different figures and perhaps a case in which the employment of freedom in governmental technologies reaches a higher degree, my choice of texts in this chapter privileges the books Foucault accomplished and published during his lifetime, only complementing the analysis with a reading of the lecture courses. Choosing DP, for example, rather than other texts, is part of an exegetical effort to find (and follow) the references and remarks in which Foucault links his conception of power to Canguilhem’s reflection on norms. Additionally, choosing a text like the HM – where there is no reference to Canguilhem’s idea of norm – was a way to further highlight, through contrast, the later emergence of a concept of power based on the norm. Furthermore, re-reading HM was used as a strategy to complexify the analysis of these other textual places (where one finds the reference to Canguilhem). HM shows that the notion of freedom accompanies Foucault’s analysis of power since its beginnings. Moreover, this choice allows me to show the conceptual shift that the notions of life and norm introduce in the analysis of the relations between power and freedom.
PART I – FOUKAULT AND THE POLITICISATION OF LIFE

Chapter 1

Problematising Life: From ‘Biopower’ to ‘Way of Life’

What is the place of the notion of life in Foucault’s work? What are the changes in the reading of Foucault’s work that an emphasis on the concept of life can produce? In this chapter, my main goal is to set up my methodological position, while situating my research in the current debate of the periodisation and chronology of Foucault’s work. My proposition is to establish the notion of life as my hermeneutical standpoint in the reading of his work. In order to do this, I will present the problem of life in different points of Foucault’s research, focusing especially on two different axes: [i] power: discipline and biopolitics; [ii] life as a work of art and the technologies of the self, asking whether the relation of the notions of ‘life’ in these different moments is one of mere homonymy.

1.1. The Problem of Life in Foucault’s Work

1.1.1. Questions of Method: Periodisation of Foucault’s work and the Issue of Life

Foucault’s work is structured around philosophical histories. He presents the points of inflection in a trajectory, points of emergence of new concepts, objects, institutions, and social practices (involving knowledge, power and truth). Throughout his work, one of these sets of objects, concepts and practices will be particularly important, the one configured around the notion of life. Foucault historically situates emergence of the knowledge of life (the constitution of life as an object of knowledge) and he analyses the forms and technologies of power over and of life, that is, the government and the care of life.

If we consider the apparent discrepancy between these two different initial characterisations (the constitution of a knowledge of life and the formation of technologies of government over life), we can note that analysing and articulating Foucault’s notion of life is a complex task. If we relate these two forms of analysing life, we can refer them, respectively, to different moments in Foucault’s research: the 1965 work The Order of Things, and the first volume of The History of Sexuality, published in 1976. Studying Foucault’s problematisations of life presupposes, then, a transversal reading of his work, since life appears in moments as different as The Birth of the Clinic or the Will to Knowledge,
passing through books as dissimilar as *The Order of Things* and the genealogical book *par excellence, Discipline and Punish,* first published in 1975. Additionally, life reappears in several texts from the 1980s, such as the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality,* where the notion of *bios* appears in the concept of *techne tou biou* – in the ancient world and especially in the Hellenistic and Roman traditions –, or yet in different figures that Foucault reads as engaged in the project of an “aesthetics of existence” and the cultivation of one’s life as a work of art, such as Montaigne, Baudelaire, Stirner and others. In 1984, philosophy is defined as a “test of life (...) and the elaboration of a particular kind or modality of life”. In his last lecture at the Collège de France in 28 March 1984, Foucault expresses his intention to continue to pursue the history of *bios,* or “history of the arts of living, of philosophy as form of life”.

This transversal reading seems necessary once we focus on the notion of life. It is important to remark that it challenges a certain chronology of Foucault’s work, one that has become an assumption in scholarship, which could be traced back to Dreyfus and Rabinow’s study *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics,* and which has since then proliferated in many studies and commentaries of Foucault’s work. This chronology takes up Foucault’s methodological characterisations of *archaeology,* *genealogy* and *ethics,* and then divides his work in different discrete moments or periods, relating to each other in a discontinuous way. According to this view, breaks and ruptures, as well as the theoretical exhaustion (or “failure”) of the archaeological moment, would have led Foucault to formulate a new approach based on the concept of power, or a ‘genealogy of power’, which would be somehow radically different from an ‘archaeology of knowledge’ and ‘discourses’.

According Stuart Elden, this division has become an ‘orthodoxy’ in scholarship. It reappears even in the work of scholars who enquire lines of continuity in Foucault’s work. These lines of continuity are often thought of as connecting discrete, relatively independent and self-contained moments. This is valid especially for the perceived singularity of Foucault’s reflection on the constitution of the subject in the 1980s, which would mark a

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42 UP and CS, respectively.
43 Cf. HS, especially 17 February 1982: First hour.
44 CT, 127.
45 CT, 316.
radical difference in relation to his alleged “dismissal of political agency in his account of power relations” in such a way that the 1980s are often considered the moment of the ‘return of the subject’ in Foucault’s work.

When analysing this issue, Béatrice Han claims that the “chronology of Foucault’s major works is interrupted by two silences of five and eight years, at the end of which Foucault seems to have abandoned, or reformed, his previous methods. This archaeology is followed by genealogy, and that is, in its turn, [followed] by the study of the techniques of the self”. Han also argues that there is another sign of the break between the different methodological, theoretical and chronological moments in Foucault’s work by a change in the historical universe analysed: while archaeology and genealogy “study similar periods (approximately from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century), the last one opens onto a time so remote (Greek and Roman antiquity and the beginnings of Christianity) that it appears to have little connection with the previous two”. Despite her emphasis on this fundamental discontinuity, Han’s aim is that of establishing a line of philosophical continuity in Foucault’s work, which she partially finds in Kant. She claims that “the identification of the Kantian aporia provided Foucault with a guideline (...) which allowed him to reopen the critical question of the conditions of possibility of knowledge while attempting to ‘throw off the last anthropological constraints’”. For Han, this reference to Kant would allow us to “identify the specifically philosophical ambition in Foucault’s project”, whose main question would be that “of the possibility of defining a new way of connecting history to philosophy, a middle path between an idealism he judged excessive – that of Kant and the post-Kantians

50 In the “Introduction: Rethinking Autonomy between Subjection and Subjectivation” (in Foucault and the Making of Subjects, 1-2), the authors attempt to show the importance of the thematic of autonomy in Foucault’s work and the possibility of developing it as a line of interpretation “despite the fact that Foucault refers only marginally to autonomy”, going against the line of criticism according to which Foucault left no room for autonomous action, freedom and agency, overemphasising power, discipline and subjection. Their contention is that Foucault is not the thinker of “power and discipline”, but that his conception of power presupposes the “intransigence of freedom” and resistance.
52 Han, Foucault’s Critical Project, 1.
53 It is interesting to note that Kant is also – together with Nietzsche – another point of contact between Foucault and Canguilhem. Xavier Roth shows the importance of Kant and the French Kantians (such as Alain and his master, Lagneau) in the formation of Canguilhem’s thought and his idea of normativity. Roth argues, for instance, that a text such as Lagneau’s Cours sur l’existence de Dieu was, indeed, more important than Nietzsche for the formation of Canguilhem’s philosophy (Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience, 121; 128). The role of Kant and the French Kantians (especially Alain) will be discussed in Chapter 3, when I will present Canguilhem’s philosophical background.
54 Han, Foucault’s Critical Project, 5.
and the too reductive materialism of the thinkers lumped together by Foucault under the rubric of ‘Marxists’.  

I would momentarily like to suspend judgement in what concerns the articulation of Han’s main hypothesis as well as in what regards the theoretical adversaries in relation to which she understands Foucault’s position (post-Kantians and Marxists). What I would rather like to stress here is, one the one hand, Han’s effort in identifying a link, a line of continuity between different moments of Foucault’s work, which she finds in the Kantian reference to the transcendental: the condition of possibilities of knowledge, which in Foucault’s case are historical and not derived of an analysis of human faculties, while also refusing the anthropological standpoint, “that is, to look for a transcendental without a subject”. Han’s view seems to rely on the acute perception of a philosophical problem – or a problem for a philosophical investigation – in Foucault’s work, namely, the continuity and the persistence of a philosophical problem throughout his trajectory. The problematic aspect of this continuity will also be central to this investigation of Foucault’s notion of life.

In this sense, I would also like to stress the way the main question Han identifies as a constant or a line of continuity (namely, the problem of the relation between the historical and the transcendental) is, nevertheless, articulated along the lines of different discrete moments, marked by breaks, discontinuities and silences, which somehow surreptitiously restores Dreyfus and Rabinow’s narrative based on, at least, two fundamental breaks or points of exhaustion of a certain form of problematisation or method. Thus, even this complex and elaborate reflection on the continuity of Foucault’s motivations and problematics gives place to a distinction of discrete theoretical moments in his work. Han sees the continuity of a question – namely, the relation between history and a priori – and a discontinuity of methods, marked by two interruptions and two silences.

To quote an extreme case, which does not follow Dreyfus and Rabinow careful hermeneutical work, a much less mitigated approach is that of Eric Paras, who stresses a series of multiple breaks within Foucault’s work, fragmenting it in different contradictory sections, especially in what concerns the so-called ‘last’ or ‘late Foucault’. Interpretations

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55 Han, Foucault’s Critical Project, 5.
56 Han, Foucault’s Critical Project, 6. In a 2016 article, “Foucault, Normativity and Critique as Practice of the Self” (Continental Philosophy Review, 49), Han will distinguish two main forms of the critical question, the “how possible” sort of question, which looks for “enabling conditions”, empirical or transcendental, for certain states of affairs, and the “whether permissible” questions, which look at “the conditions of legitimacy and ethical normativity” (85-86)
such as this are basis for many of the criticisms of Foucault’s project. For Paras, there would be a ‘return of the subject’ in Foucault’s work. Paras formulates the problem for his historical investigation in the following terms: “how and why does Foucault go from being a philosopher of the disappearance of the subject to one wholly preoccupied with the subject?”.

Roughly, for Paras, Foucault’s work is marked by a politicisation after 1968 which would be expressed by a stark Marxist tone and vocabulary in the 1970s. However, later in that decade, the work would be marked by Foucault’s “gradual migration towards (...) neoliberal (...) politics”. According to him, Foucault’s interest in the Iranian Revolution and the notion of what we could call a collective “political spirituality” demonstrates his “changing political affiliations” and his “emergent interest in religion and ethics”. As Paras argues, “it also elucidates his move away from the ‘strong’ anti-subjectivity position expressed in the disciplinary hypothesis, and his first tentative in the direction of the study of the subject as an independent phenomenon”, which would culminate in 1979, when Foucault “turned away from modern forms of power in order to focus on religious and ethical practices in the ancient world”. His genealogical method, then, “gave way to a text-driven hermeneutics that, in a way that recalled the archaeological analyses of the pre-1968 period, de-emphasised social and political context”. Paras goes on to claim that there would be a

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58 Paras. *Foucault 2.0*, 3.
59 Paras. *Foucault 2.0*, 11. Paras seems to over-interpret Foucault last works by saying he is approximating his theories of a (neo)liberal politics, and his philosophy to a Sartrean existentialism. Firstly, because these two attributions seem not to be consistent with one another. The association between Foucault and neoliberalism, especially grounded on the lectures of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, assume two opposite connotations: the criticism to Foucault, the neoliberal, or its celebration (a certain liberal interpretation of Foucault which situates “neoliberalism” in opposition to “discipline”, then claiming that Foucault thought the former was preferable to the latter, as Ewald does). On the side of the critique of neoliberalism, and a reading of Foucault with Marx, we find Wendy Brown’s book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015). I believe the impact of this book has not yet been fully appreciated by scholarship. Wendy Brown reflects on the relation between democracy (in its liberal representative form, but also in the form of a radical democratic imaginary of self-rule, popular power and sovereignty that exceed this liberal form) and neoliberalism, from a Foucauldian perspective. She argues that neoliberalism and its governmental rationality are undoing democracy, by transposing the issues of politics to economic rationality, while at the same time restricting political and democratic action and citizenship. Starting from Plato’s homology between the soul and the city, she discusses a new homology, that of individual and States as firms, economic realities and capital to managed. Does the rationality of the *homo oeconomicus* in its specific neoliberal version dissolve the *homo politicus*, as well as public, collective and democratic imagination and practice? Brown asks “What happens to rule by and for the people when neoliberal reason configures both the soul and the city as contemporary firms, rather than as polities? What happens to the constituent elements of democracy – its culture, subjects, principles, and institutions – when neoliberal rationality saturates political life?” (27).
60 Paras does not demonstrate, however, how the interest for the Iranian Revolution would express Foucault’s neoliberal politics.
61 Paras. *Foucault 2.0*, 12.
62 Paras. *Foucault 2.0*, 12.
63 Paras. *Foucault 2.0*, 12.
“gradual abandonment of genealogy” and a turn to the individual outside the mechanisms of power.

Although this line of interpretation could draw on many passages in which Foucault emphasises shifts and theoretical displacements in his work, against system-building, it would still be possible to underline a whole series of problems and mistakes with lines of interpretation such as Paras’, in which we can only find a proliferation of breaks. First, one can argue that there was not a turn to antiquity or a turn to subjectivity in Foucault’s work. This philosophical concern for subjectivity as well as for antiquity as place for philosophical formulation appears in different moments in his work. Additionally, Foucault’s attention to antiquity is political: it is from the perspective of a history of the present that he reads the ancients in the 1980s, and it is from the perspective of the relations of conflict and force that he reads the will to truth in his incursions in Classical Greece in his first series of lectures at the Collège de France. In this sense, differently to what many commentators and critics claim, the concern with antiquity is not something particular or exclusive to a ‘late’ Foucault. The role of antiquity in the Lectures on the Will to Know, shows how a reflection on antiquity was of key importance for the formulation of genealogy and of the relations between knowledge and power, or government and truth.

Far from a detailed refutation of the criticisms regarding the fragmentation of Foucault’s work and the description of its alleged radical unprecedented turns and shifts, my

64 Paras. *Foucault 2.0*, 13.
65 As an evidence, Paras quotes Alessandro Fontana’s commentary on the lectures of the Birth of Biopolitics, in which he stresses, according to Paras, “a detour (...) to find the individual outside the mechanisms of power”. Besides Foucault’s constant associations of individual identity and the very notion of individual to a certain regime of truth and power – to a mutually supportive relationship between forms of modern power and State power and the very notion of individual –, which would at least serve as methodological control against this sort of formulation, there is an evident translation problem: he renders the notion of ‘au-délà’ in Fontana’s note as ‘outside’, which gives way to all sorts of misinterpretations.
66 The whole lecture of 30 January 1980 is informative in what concerns the sense and limits of these theoretical displacements. Although Foucault emphasises the strategic aspect of an analysis that refuses universals and must displace itself theoretically (“a new course, a new line”). The theoretical displacement, however, mitigates the notion of shift (and seems to put the notion of a radical break in methods and concepts in suspension): Foucault says that these lines of displacement in his work refer rather to the constitution of new forms of intelligibility (GL, 76). A good example is his claim of the displacement of “power” and “knowledge (savoir)” towards the categories of “government” and “truth” (GL, 12). This displacement would not mean, however, neither an abandonment of nor a radical break with the ideas and content of the notions of power and knowledge (Foucault qualifies the claim of radical break as “hypocritical”). On the contrary, as he explains, “I will say that passing from the notion of knowledge-power to that of government by the truth essentially involves giving a positive and differentiated content to these two terms of knowledge and power” (GL, 12). The notion of government is simply “more operational” than that of power.
67 DP, 31; FR, 45.
intention is to call the reader’s attention the fact that the more access we have to a more complete material of Foucault’s corpus, the more we can note the persistence of certain problematics and concerns, which does not mean that the unity of the work is independent of an effort of interpretation. Indeed, the very issue of the continuity of Foucault’s investigation is a philosophical problem. My proposition is to investigate the possibilities of articulating this continuity – throughout the theoretical displacements Foucault often proposes – through the mobilisation of the notion of life and to a series of concepts which I think are closely connected to it (namely, the notion of norm, but also those of government and subjectivity).

Although Dreyfus and Rabinow’s book was written in dialogue with Foucault himself\(^6\) – and perhaps that is one of the reasons for its ‘authority’ in Foucauldian scholarship – the ternary theoretical, methodological and thematic division it presents of Foucault’s work (archaeology, genealogy and ethics) introduces a series of problems, despite its didactic and propaedeutic value.\(^6\) Despite the value of this didactic division in systematising Foucault’s plural research projects – grouping under some predominant lines, or let us say, ideal types, a plurality of analyses and methods – it is also possible that this division hides or masks certain problematics that can be articulated or made explicit once we consider different parameters, as, for example, the issue of life. Thus, in terms of the historiography of Foucault’s thought, it is possible to say that this periodisation is only a possibility among others, and as an interpretative resource, it hides as much as it shows or clarifies in terms of the reading of Foucault’s texts. Foucault’s readers must acknowledge the potential, but also the limitations of this resource, putting it aside when necessary.

For instance, considering the classic characterisation of archaeology and its alleged correspondence to a chronological cut, the place of the History of Madness becomes unclassifiable, since, as we will see, in this book Foucault presents an analysis of non-

\(^6\) In the process of writing the book, the authors interview Foucault on different occasions. This book was definitely a landmark in Foucault studies, and it was also one of the first books dedicated to Foucault’s work, especially during Foucault’s lifetime, which he had the chance to read. We could add that it is also central for the formation of what would be called ‘French Theory’ in the United States: a particular reception of French philosophy in the institutional framework of American Universities. Concerning this notion of ‘French Theory’, see Esposito. Da Fuori: una filosofia per l’Europa (2016).

\(^6\) It is possible to say that Dreyfus and Rabinow present a ternary division not only in terms of method, but a projection of these three methodological configurations in a line of succession in time: the 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s. My point is not to undermine the possibility of distinguishing different methodological procedures in Foucault’s work, either in different moments in time (diachronic perspective) or in different theoretical moments (synchronic perspective). It is, rather, to introduce the notion of life as a specific hermeneutical tool in reading discontinuities and, especially, the potential continuities between Foucault’s philosophical histories and problematisations.
discursive social practices and perceptions regarding the mad.\textsuperscript{70} In this book Foucault shows how these practices – confinement and silencing and, then, strict and constant observation in the context of the asylum – create the historical, concrete, conditions of possibility for the constitution of modern psychiatry. The “archaeology of silence”\textsuperscript{71} Foucault mobilises in the \textit{History of Madness} is a history of the way in which madness and the mad were silenced by the a fundamental choice of Western culture and the mobilisation of a repressive power of great intensity,\textsuperscript{72} to be, then, forced to speak and express their interiority and their pathology under the attentive gaze of the psychiatrist.\textsuperscript{73} This series of problems is a form of \textit{atopos} in the traditional notion of archaeology as a structural analysis of discourse, concerned with the epistemic conditions of formation of statements and domains of knowledge. The same is valid of \textit{The Birth of the Clinic}, which also mobilises an analysis of institutions, governmental actions, and forms of perception. The book analyses the formation of that which Foucault calls the “medical gaze” in the eighteenth century. By employing the resource of the ternary chronological-methodological distinction, and reading \textit{The Birth of the Clinic} as an archaeological book (emphasising the discursive formation of knowledge), the clear prefiguration of the biopolitical paradigm in Foucault’s analyses of the politicisation of medicine and the medicalisation of society, would be invisible or, at least, lose its importance.\textsuperscript{74}

It is possible to note, then, that Foucault’s approach, as well as his accounts for the different methodological tools he develops, are much more complex than the tripartite systematisation of his work suggests. It is more complex, because it depends of a certain hermeneutical choice regarding the parameters we set in our reading of Foucault, and what are the concepts and problems that this choice brings to light or helps hiding.\textsuperscript{75} It is also

\textsuperscript{70} Some passages of \textit{The History of Madness} will be discussed in Part III, so as to explain and illustrate Foucault’s different views on power.

\textsuperscript{71} This concept appears in the first preface to HM, later excluded by Foucault.

\textsuperscript{72} See HM, especially “The Great Confinement”.

\textsuperscript{73} See HM, especially “The Birth of the Asylum” and “The Good Use of Freedom”.

\textsuperscript{74} As Foucault shows in this book, the formation of the medical gaze cannot be separated from what he calls the formation of a “political consciousness” in medicine, which involves the “the doctor’s supervision of social structures” and the “definition of a political status for medicine” (BC, 29). The epistemological formation of the medical clinical gaze also depends on the institutional constitution of medicine, in the investment in the hospital space and through the law regulating medical practice and teaching, which reorganised the schools of medicine, during and after the French Revolution (for example, BC, 83-84). Additionally, like in HM, concrete institutional conditions serve as concrete \textit{a priori} for the formation of medicine (BC, especially “The Free Field”). Foucault refers the formation of medicine as “a clinical science” to “concrete \textit{a priori}, which is now possible to uncover” (BC, xvii).

\textsuperscript{75} One could say that what is at stake here is the choice of what one exhibits, what is shown and what remains outside of the picture; in a word, a matter of \textit{framing}. Although she uses this term in very a
complex because of the ways Foucault tried to provide different accounts (in many different occasions and circumstances, especially in interviews and lecture courses) for the status and place of the methodological and thematic differences in his work, which not always coincide with the linear chronology of three moments separated by two silences and two radical reconfigurations.

Even if, on the one hand, by privileging a book like *The Order of Things* (or the *Archaeology of Knowledge*) to illustrate the main characters of an archaeology of knowledge, and *Discipline and Punish* (or the *Will to Knowledge*), to illustrate the main traits of a genealogy of power, a certain division between the two methodologies appears as fully coherent and consistent; on the other hand, if we consider other textual places and different concepts, this clear-cut distinction gives space to grey zones and intestine continuities.

In different moments, Foucault presents his work in terms of a marked continuity and complementarity in terms of themes and methods. I think this position is particularly helpful in the treatment of the question of life in Foucault’s work, since, I believe, this issue establishes the possibility of reading this work through the perspective of a thematic continuity.76 This ‘continuist’ hypothesis needs, however, to find support in Foucault’s texts. Indeed, in these texts, archaeology and genealogy are sometimes presented as different methodological moments in a same approach or analysis, or as Daniel Defert puts it, theoretical moments that are “mutually supportive”.77 Before showing how the issue of life establishes a possible line of continuity in Foucault’s work, I would like to underline this methodological claim according to which genealogy and archaeology can be seen as mutually supportive, by adding that they sometimes also overlap in terms of concepts and procedures. In this regard, I would like to briefly discuss three examples supporting this claim. First, I would like to refer to the already mentioned presence of power and the role of non-discursive social practices and institutions in the *History of Madness*. Indeed, as I will show in Part III, in this book we find many analogies with what would later be conceptualised by Foucault as genealogy, such as the attention to the concrete institutional practices – assemblages of space, bodies, gaze – in the enquiry on the formation of medical and

76 As Blencowe proposes in *Biopolitical Experience* (London: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2012, 34): “Whereas many commentators divide Foucault’s work up into a succession of periods (...), I will be drawing on work from different points in Foucault’s career and demonstrating the considerable continuity of his concern with life, limits, experience and politics”. My research will engage in this line of investigation, trying to reconstruct a thematic unity or continuity articulated around the notion of life.

psychiatric knowledge. Psychopathology has a concrete history which sets up its conditions of emergence, and in this articulating this concrete history Foucault builds a picture of the different forms of power operation. The *History of Madness* uncovers a whole series of non-discursive social practices (or what he then calls a *perception*) which characterise the different ways of historically experiencing madness and acting upon the social actors that fall under the category of madness and, in modernity, mental illness. In the *History of Madness*, archaeology – as and “archaeology of silence” and an “archaeology of perception” – implies the analytical attention to power relations. Thus, I believe one of the most striking similarities (or analogies) is between, on the one hand, the role of the technologies of power and punishment in the emergence of human sciences in *Discipline and Punish*, and, on the other, the role of the institutional practice of selective and ‘humanised’ confinement in the asylum and its role in the emergence of psychiatry and mental medicine. In this sense, in both books we find the fundamental implication of power and knowledge, which could be characterised as quintessentially ‘genealogical’ according to the standard tripartite division of Foucault’s work.

Second, an example of this overlap between the concerns of genealogy and archaeology could be taken from Foucault’s characterisation of his work in the 1979-1980 lecture course – *The Government of the Living*. In this course, Foucault uses the term ‘archaeology’ to designate a certain approach to power relations, namely the emphasis on “the non-necessity of all power of whatever kind”, since power would always be the product of the “contingency and fragility of a history”. Contradicting the dominant ideas about his work, according to which the notion of power is constitutive of genealogy, being absent from archaeology, since the latter would be a formal analysis of discourses and its epistemological conditions of possibilities, in 1979-1980, Foucault situates the issue of power within the field of problems of archaeology. In the lecture of 30 January 1980, Foucault discusses his position as a critic of power through convergences (but also what he claims to

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78 DE1, 188; see, for instance, HM, 101, 390.
79 I will develop this insight in Part III.
80 Employing the term ‘genealogy’ here (without inverted commas) would be anachronistic to say the least; my attempt, however, is to stress analogous analytical procedures concerning the importance of concrete social practices and institutional settings for the formation of specific forms of knowledge. I believe this calls into question the schematic separation of archaeology as a mere discourse-focused ‘structural’ analysis of epistemological formations and genealogy as a cartography of power relations which makes certain forms of knowledge and experience possible.
81 GL, 78
82 GL, 77
be some divergences) from “anarchy” or “anarchism”. As Foucault explains, “you can see therefore that there is certainly some kind of relation between what is roughly called anarchy or anarchism and the methods I employ, but that the differences are equally clear”, adding that “the position I adopt does not absolutely exclude anarchy”. Foucault believes that the main point in which his work converges with anarchism is a radical critique of power, pointing to its contingency and non-acceptability. As he explains through this contrast, his own position is based on the idea of the “non-acceptability of power, not at the end of the enterprise, but at the beginning of the work, in the form of a questioning of all the ways in which power is in actual fact accepted”. From this comparison between anarchism and archaeology, Foucault playfully describes his position as an “anarchaeology”: “So I will say that what I am proposing is rather a sort of anarcheology”. Foucault, then, rereads and reassesses his work in terms of “the anarcheological type of study”, concerning the study of the confinement of madness, of crime and its punishment and the work on the subject.

Another recovery of archaeology, this time as a methodological moment of a broader analysis, which would also include genealogy, can be found in the opening lecture of The Government of Self and Others (5 January 1983). This seems to be a privileged place to visualise what Defert referred to as the “mutually supportive” aspect of the two perspectives. In this lecture Foucault refers to his project as a “history of thought”, where “thought” is to be understood as what he designates as “focal points of experience”.

83 “I don’t quite know why the words ‘anarchy’ or ‘anarchism’ are so pejorative that the mere fact of employing them counts as a triumphant critical discourse” (GL, 78).
84 GL, 78.
85 GL, 78.
86 This idea of “non-acceptability” of certain technologies of power and the effects they produce is found also in the important theme of the “intolerable” in Foucault’s work: for him, the role of the critic is to expose the intolerability of power technologies. See DE1, text 94, “Je perçois l’intolérable”. The theme of the “intolerable” also appears in Foucault’s militant action and his participation in the G.I.P (Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons). For an interesting edition gathering material of the group from 1971 to 1973, with an introduction by Philippe Artières, see Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons, Intolérable (Paris: Verticales, 2013). Stuart Elden thinks that Foucault’s activism should be fully considered part of his thought and work (The Birth of Power, 6). He adds that we “still have an incomplete sense of Foucault’s activism (…). As Deleuze and others have long recognised, Foucault’s political work is crucial in understanding his transition from The Archaeology of Knowledge to Discipline and Punish. While most of the documents of the Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons have been published in France (…) little is said about his involvement with other groups, including parallel ones on health and asylums” (Foucault: The Birth of Power, 6).
87 GL, 78.
88 GL, 79.
89 GL, 79.
90 GL, 79-80.
91 GSO, 1. On the notion of the “history of experience” and “forms of experience”, see also UP, 4 and FR, 333-334.
latter are defined as the joint articulation of three elements, namely: [i] “a possible knowledge (savoir)”; [ii] “normative frameworks of behaviour for individuals” and [iii] “modes of existence for possible subjects”. One can note in this division of analytical tasks something analogous to the tripartite methodological and thematic division between archaeology, genealogy and ethics. These three moments, instead of being discontinuous or contradictory with each other, compose a more general framework of analysis, that of a “history of thought”, a history of experience or of “focal points of experience” (perhaps something along the lines of what Foucault ironically defined as “anarchaeology” in the 1979-1980 lectures).

Once again, as in 1979, the example of the articulation of these three methodological moments is his work on madness. As Foucault explains, analysing madness as an experience within our culture correspond to [i] an investigation on knowledge, an archaeology, and a study of the forms of production of the truth and veridiction; that is to say, to analyse madness as “a point from which a series of heterogeneous forms of knowledge were formed”. It also corresponds to a second procedure consisting in the analysis of power or what was conventionally called genealogy, a study of the techniques for conducting the conduct of others, in this case, governing the mad. As Foucault explains, this would be a study of [ii] a “set of norms, both norms against which madness could be picked out as a phenomenon of deviance within society and, at the same time, norms of behaviour for normal individuals”. Finally, [iii] studying “madness insofar as this experience (…) defined the constitution of a certain mode of being of the normal subject, as opposed to and in

92 GSO, 1.
93 And to what he called a “history of thought in action”, in the 1960s, or a “philosophie en acte” (DE1, 608).
94 We could say that from the perspective of a description of the method employed, Foucault understands his work as a “history of thought”, but a history of thought understood as a complex experience, involving institutions, discourses, but also non-discursive practices, forms of perception, ways of relating to norms, etc. That is to say a history of thought in action. On the other hand, from a more normative or politically engaged perspective Foucault refers to his work as an anarchaeology: an unveiling of the intolerable aspects of the way power operates and of the ways in which we are governed, which finds its expression also at a theoretical level, with the idea that no power is necessary. In this sense, as he explained, the non-acceptability of power is at the beginning of the work, guiding the research through the meshes and effects of power, from a critical perspective (that finds its convergence with anarchism in terms of method: to take up the critique and the non-acceptability of power as a sort of methodological – and (crypto)normative? – guiding thread). We will discuss the way in each critique relates to social struggles and the agents involved in them when reopening the debate on Foucault’s normative deficit. The discussion on Foucault and anarchism will be the object of future work.
95 GSO, 3.
96 GSO, 3.
relation to the mad subject”. If Foucault stresses a new form of understanding his work by a displacement to the analysis of savoir to a broader category of truth and veridiction, in the first aspect of the analysis, he also points to a displacement concerning power.

As he explained in 1979, this displacement did not mean to abandon the insights and conceptual structures, as well as the methodological tools developed under the rubric of an analytic of power. On the contrary, it preserves the achievements of this analytic extending its reach by introducing a more general and operational concept, that of government. Not only does this concept give a new intelligibility to the notion of power, but it also emphasises one of its most important aspects: that of an active exercise (rather than a property), the procedures for conduction the conducts of others and for constituting norms of behaviour. As Foucault explains in The Government of Self and Others: “I tried to pose the question of norms of behaviour first in terms of power”. However, by emphasising the notion of “exercise”, power appears “as a field of procedures of government”. So, following Foucault’s line of thought: we have the problem of norms, which is framed through the idea of a certain exercise of power, later assimilated in a more operational notion of governmentality.

By looking at these two moments in Foucault’s lectures (1979-1980 and 1982-1983) we see the implication between methods and theoretical configurations usually described in scholarship as archaeology and genealogy, both in the form of an overlap, as in the notion of “anarchaeology” and its concern for the critical analysis of power (in The Government of the Living) and as a structure of methodologically mutually supportive moments or lines of analysis, as in The Government of Self and Others.

Considering this, the position my thesis develops is close to that which Stuart Elden articulates in his work The Birth of Power regarding the historiography of Foucault’s work. According to Elden:

If we follow the standard story, Foucault has a concern with knowledge as a problem and archaeology as an approach in the late 1960s, which was replaced by a focus on power and the genealogical methodology in the first part of the 1970s, a turn to governmentality in the latter part of the 1970s and a concern with ethics, truth and practices of the self, especially in Greek thought, in the 1980s.

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97 GSO, 3.
98 GSO, 4.
99 GSO, 4.
100 Elden, Foucault. The Birth of Power, 21-21.
Elden challenges this division, especially pointing to the importance of the Lectures on the Will to Know. Indeed, these lectures – Foucault’s first lecture course at the Collège de France – complicate the hegemonic narrative concern the chronology and division of Foucault’s work, especially in the sense that they show Foucault’s study of antiquity as a site for the construction of the tools of genealogy, understood as a political history of truth. Foucault’s analyses of Aristotle, Homer and Sophocles attempt to “put the game of truth back in the network of constraints and dominations”. And he adds that truth, “the system of truth and falsity would have revealed the face it turned away from us for so long and which is that of violence”.

Before analysing how this reframing of Foucault’s work provides an interesting interpretative position to read his researches concerning the notion of life, some further clarification concerning this topic is necessary. By emphasising a continuity that the notion of life establishes, I do not think the different moments and places in Foucault’s work should be necessarily considered as coherent and consistent simply as a matter of principle. Undoubtedly, discontinuities and inflections will be found, and the task also seems to be to emphasise these tensions and problems that emerge around the issue of life. From a methodological position, I believe that the hypothesis of the continuity of the issue of life can lead to other forms of thinking tensions and discontinuities in Foucault’s work, which are not necessarily articulated to the ternary division, and which are not established as an assumption and from the start.

In this sense, from the perspective of the issue of life, things are even more complicated. For example, Vera Portocarrero, while subscribing to the discontinuity between archaeology and genealogy theorised by Dreyfus and Rabinow, notes an important link between biology (studied by archaeology) and life understood from the political perspective (which appears in biopolitics). She argues that the concept of life could be considered as the line connecting archaeology to genealogy. This is because the

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101 LWK, 4.
102 LWK, 4.
104 In this respect, Portocarrero would clearly challenge, relying on the historiography Foucault articulates, Blencowe’s idea according to which biopolitics would correspond to the advent of modern evolutionary biology in the nineteenth century, whereas discipline would correspond to the “classical natural history” of the seventeenth and eighteenth century (Blencowe, Biopolitical Experience, 39). According to Portocarrero’s chronology the moment of “classical natural history” would correspond to the predominant form of power operation in the classical age, namely, sovereign power – the power of law, of the sword, of taking the subject’s life and property. It is only at the end of the Classical Age (late 18th century) that the individual body enters the field of application of power and discipline.
appearance of the notion of life and the constitution of biology and the life sciences (in the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century) find an analogy or a simultaneity with the constitution of power mechanisms over the living body of individuals and the health and vitality of the social body. Portocarrero claims that “there is a discontinuity in the trajectory of Foucault’s research, between archaeology and genealogy. However, despite this discontinuity, it is possible to highlight the concept of life in the whole of his work”, pointing to elements of continuity, especially if we consider the intersection between biology and politics.

If the reader looks at Foucault’s work through the lens of the notion of life, then, the continuity of the concern for life appears as a striking feature of its trajectory. It traverses the works of the three different periods in which scholars tend to divide his work. In terms of the published books, it is at least since 1963, in The Birth of the Clinic, that the emphasis on the idea of vitalism – in its correlation to what he calls mortalism – is essential to his analysis of Bichat and the formation of medical knowledge. Life appears as one of the main objects of analysis of this book. More striking, perhaps, is to note the presence of the encounter between life and the political, that is, a certain approach to what could be understood as the politicisation of life as early as 1963. As Blencowe points out, “the politicisation of embodiment and life, and a production of life-vitality, creativity, health, reproduction, security and evolution” could shed light on continuities across Foucault’s oeuvre: “The concern with ‘life’ as a historically produced category and with the role of limits in the constitution of life and experiences” is present “from The Birth of the Clinic to The Care

(DP, 135). Blencowe is right to note this tension of the Classical Age: on the one hand, the whole framework of discipline presupposes the idea of mechanism, coming from Descartes and La Mettrie (DP, 136); on the other, it is the beginning of a vitalistic conception of the body and its energies and forces that gradually becomes central to the operation of power (see, for instance, the ‘biological’ basis that Foucault talks about in the beginning of DP, 25. Following Portocarrero, if it is true that modern biology plays also a role in the establishment of the human sciences, this history is complemented by the modes of objectivation of bodies and individuals – a political anatomy of the body – grouped under the concept of discipline as described in DP. For Foucault’s account of the role of discipline and punitive practices in the formation of human sciences, see DP, 22-25; see also the section on “Examination” (DP, 184-194).

105 Portocarrero, As ciências da vida, 157-158.
106 Portocarrero, As ciências da vida, 162; my translation.
107 BC, 177-179. It is important to note that, differently from what Deleuze and Agamben seem to think, Foucault’s archaeology of the emergence of life is not framed as a philosophical appropriation of Bichat’s notion of life. Foucault, in these passages, seems more concerned with highlighting the ‘mortalism’ that accompanies the formation of Bichat’s notion of life; Foucault’s emphasis is on the negative, for “death was the only possibility of giving life a positive truth” (BC, 178); it is in the “brightness of death” that “the night of the living is dissipated” (BC, 180).
108 Blencowe, Biopolitical Experience, 3.
of the Self”. Gilles Deleuze also stresses the importance of this book for Foucault’s notion of life, as he says: “From The Birth of the Clinic on, Foucault admired Bichat for having invented a new vitalism by defining life as the set of those functions that resist death”, and he claims that Foucault’s work culminates in the formulation of a vitalism that enables him to think resistance.110

Indeed, in 1963, before the clear formulation of the notion of biopolitics, Foucault gave an account of the political import of modern medicine, presenting a view of the history of clinical practices and the medical gaze, presupposing an institutional framework and what he then called a “political consciousness”. As Foucault argues,

The doctor’s supervision of the social structures, the pathology of epidemics and of the species are confronted by the same requirements: the definition of a political status for medicine and the constitution, at state level, of a medical consciousness whose constant task would be to provide information, supervision, and constraint, all of which relate to the police as to the field of medicine proper.111

It is possible to note at least two key aspects of the politicisation of life in the biopolitical framework already clearly expressed in this brief characterisation from 1963: first, the political status of medicine and its insertion in society, in relation to, second, an idea of police – or a way of acting upon society and populations through what Foucault will characterise as police.112 Foucault notes the “generalised presence of doctors whose intersecting gazes form a network and exercise at every point in space, and at every moment in time, a constant, mobile, differentiated supervision”.113 To this, he adds a whole series of procedures which will reappear under the rubric of biopolitics, thirteen years later: “there were requests for a statistical supervision of health based on the registration of births and deaths” and “detailed observations concerning the region, housing, people, principal interests, dress, atmospheric conditions...”.114 As Foucault will explain in both in the Will to Knowledge, and in the 17 March 1976 lecture of Society Must be Defended, these procedures illustrate the way in which life becomes “an unalterable element at the base of political

109 Blencowe, Biopolitical Experience, 3.
111 BC, 29.
112 The notion of police will be very important in the texts where Foucault formulates the notion of biopolitics. In the text on “Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century” (DE2, text 168), Foucault analyses the correlation between health and police, highlighting the formation of a Polizeiwissenschaft.
113 BC, 35.
114 BC, 35.
The target of State power is, in 1976 as well as in 1963, the health of the population understood as a living entity. In this sense, the biopolitical framework will presuppose a series of institutions that, as Foucault had already suggested in 1963, aim at “coordinating medical care, centralising power, and normalising knowledge.”

Medical knowledge and practice and political government were tightly connected in Foucault’s view, according to which medicine and health policies could be considered a form of governing the living population: “The first task of the doctor is therefore political: the struggle against disease must begin with a war against bad government.” Both medicine and government shifted their sphere of knowledge, concepts and practices, in such a way that, on the one hand, society was medicalised and, on the other, medicine was politicised. Guillaume Le Blanc discusses this articulation in his essay “A Brief History of Bioethics”. In this text, he refers to a specific passage of the Birth of the Clinic in which “Foucault identifies a break between the old medicine of the eighteenth century and the new medicine of the nineteenth century”. According to him, “Medicine is no longer characterised by the value of health, but by that of normality”. Normality, in its turn, is not only a medical concept, but fundamentally a social one. In this sense, the “birth of the clinic is a new event in the order of knowledge and power. It signifies a new experience of power based on a new knowledge, biology. The bodies are auscultated, individualised within a new framework, the hospital”. Medicine becomes, fundamentally, a medicine of normality, giving rise to a new meaning of pathology as a quantitative dysfunction of the normal. In this context, medical intervention is equal to restoration of particular norms.

Both these developments in medicine and in politics have as their ground the formulation of a certain concept of life, which I will investigate and explicitly articulate,

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116 SMD, 245-247.
117 SMD, 244.
118 BC, 38. The “war against bad government” seems to be something that will be thematised by Foucault later in his research, when he analyses the liberal governmentalities. In this sense, medicine could be understood as part of an exercise of power and government that is not necessarily nor exclusively an activity of the State.
120 Le Blanc “A Brief History of Bioethics”, 26. Le Blanc is explicitly referring to BC, 40.
123 “Nineteenth-century medicine (...) was regulated more in accordance with normality than with health; it formed its concepts and prescribed its interventions in relation to as standard of functioning and organic structure” (BC, 40).
emphasising the points of emergence of notions such norm and normality, both in the field of politics and that of medical practice and thought.

The Birth of the Clinic is a good example that it is possible to note not only certain historical synchronicities between, for instance, the emergence of life in the modern episteme (Order of Things),\textsuperscript{124} and the establishment of new technologies of power which rely on the life of subjects and populations (Discipline and Punish and the Will to Knowledge). The Birth of the Clinic seems to be an articulation of an event in thought in two different levels, synthesising two forms of analysis Foucault mobilises: on the one hand, the archaeology of medical knowledge and the notion of life; on the other, the constitution of a series of political technologies over life (the living body of individuals and populations). That is to say, it shows that the emergence of the concept of life in modern medicine is also simultaneous to the political procedures extended over biological life. This book shows how the issue of the politicisation of life, of the problematisation of the notion of life and, more specifically, its problematisation as a political concept could be considered as a more or less implicit thread linking different moments of Foucault’s work.

The notion of life seems to be a concept that disorganises any easy assumption about Foucault’s work and its chronology and classification. At the same time, it is a notion that opens the possibility for us to develop new lines of reading, revealing important continuities. On the one hand, the notion of life opens a viewpoint on a whole series of possible connections between different moments of Foucault’s work: by focusing on life, it is possible to see many moments of prefiguration, such as the supervision of the “individual existence” and the “collective life of the nation” in The Birth of the Clinic;\textsuperscript{125} on the other hand, one must not believe that life is a clearly defined concept, which would invariantly appear as a transhistorical category in different historical analyses. On the contrary, despite the visible continuities and the possibility of considering The Birth of the Clinic as a concrete point of articulation of an archaeological and a biopolitical approach to the concept of life, this

\textsuperscript{124} “The organic becomes the living and the living is that which produces, grows, and reproduces; the inorganic is the non-living, that which neither develops, nor reproduces; it lies at the frontiers of life, the inert, the unfruitful – death (...). It can be seen how (...) something resembling a biology was to become possible; and also how, in the analyses of Bichat, the fundamental opposition of life and death was able to emerge”, and he adds: “vitalism and its attempt to define the specificity of life are merely the surface effects of those archaeological events” (OT, 232). See also OT, 250, where Foucault defines “Life, Labour and Language” as “quasi-transcendentals”. A specific analysis of the emergence of life in OT is beyond the scope of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{125} BC, 36.
concept seems to have multiple meanings in different specific studies, which interact and respond to the historical material Foucault analyses.

In these distinct formulations, the notion *life* is marked by a semantic proliferation, seeming to lead us to different directions and fields of analysis. In each of these different fields, understanding the notion of life means mapping its different historical points of emergence and its different conditions of possibility in a certain historical moment – as well as its role as a condition of possibility for certain forms knowledge and practices. Moreover, we must note that Foucault does not explicitly define the concept, and when he does so, it is through a specific historical analysis of the operations that power and knowledge exercise upon life (while at the same time constituting it). The notion of life seems to express the paradox that Han identified in Foucault’s work, defined in the tension between the historical and the transcendental, between the empirical and the *a priori*. Life is a fully historical concept, relying on certain parameters of knowledge and discourse at a given point in history, and in certain configurations of forces, visibility, etc. However, life is also a condition of possibility for domains of knowledge and discourse, as well as for modern politics.

This ambiguity expresses exactly the sort of paradox we face when we look more carefully at the notion of life in Foucault’s work. To bracket the discussion around the empirical and the *a priori*, and to pose the problem in terms of the specific concerns of this thesis, it is possible to note a certain ethical and political duplicity or ambiguity of the notion of life. We simultaneously find a pivotal term, which defines the specificity of modern configurations of power and governmental rationalities, as well as an important element in the process of a problematisation of the ethical constitution and practices of oneself. We find a life that is subjected to norms, living bodies that are disciplined and living collectives that are regulated and supervised. However, we also find a life which is the material for self-elaboration, a life that creates and institutes norms, constituting different forms and ways of being – a life that, as much as the power which extends its web over it, has the potentiality

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126 Cf. Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project*.  
127 In this sense, life is a historical *a priori* in the full sense of the term, since it operates as an enabling condition intelligibility and practices but is specific to a given epoch – for, as I have stressed, there is no foundational *life* operating as a transcendental category. As Han explains, and I believe this can be applied to the notion of life, “although each historical *a priori* defined binding epistemically enabling conditions at a given time, their scope was limited both temporally and geographically: historical *a priori* change”, and she adds: “while no historical *a priori* is reducible to empirical conditions, if the relevant empirical conditions change, so will the historical *a priori*” (“Foucault, Normativity and Critique as Practice of the Self”, 88).  

for invention, creation and transformation. Although, as this thesis will show, life clearly appears as a solid and central element in Foucault’s different historical and theoretical elaborations, it seems, nevertheless, to escape our grip as soon as we start interrogating it. It is, to a certain extent, theoretically foundational, while at the same time seeming to exceed or resist definition. On the one hand, life in Foucault seems to be the condition of possibility of modern experience and unavoidably the terrain for politics, power and resistance; on the other hand, it seems to be impossible for us to turn our gaze back at it, separating it from what it produces and from what is produced over it.

To illustrate this paradox, we could borrow an example from the work of Kant, which was central and inspirational for Foucault. Although this is a complex issue which will have to be examined in further work, I would only like to suggest the possible analogies between the status of the notion of life for Foucault and for Canguilhem and the Kantian “original synthetic unity of apperception”. When situating the historical predecessors of Canguilhem (and I would add Foucault to that tradition) in French Kantianism, Roth explains, in §16 of the 1787 edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant seems to start from a first principle, the “I think” [le “Je pense”] and then deduce the possibility of experience. According to Roth, a more attentive reading of the text reveals that it is from the concept of “possible experience” that Kant extracts the notion that there must be [doit être] a transcendental subject, and not the opposite. Furthermore, the author stresses the fact that this *I think* can never be apprehended in itself. Roth draws this analogy in the context of

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128 See, for example, ST, 34. From a different angle (namely, life as the terrain of resistance against biopower), see WK, 144-145.

129 Foucault’s secondary thesis (presented alongside with *Histoire de la folie*) was a translation of Kant’s *Anthropology*, accompanied of a lengthy introduction (now available in English, *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*, edited by Roberto Nigro). Eribon reconstructs the discussion of the thesis with Maurice Gandillac and Jean Hyppolite in the defence (*Michel Foucault. Paris: Champs, 2011, 187-189*), highlighting the importance Foucault’s work on Kant to the formulation of some of the main issues of *The Order of Things*.

130 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, “Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of Understanding”, §16. My analysis here is based in the line of thought developed by Lagneau and Alain (which I develop in Part II).

131 Roth, *Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience*, 78. He adds : “C’est l’interprétation que partageont les premiers post-kantiens, notamment Schelling”. I particularly disagree with this view. I believe that by reading §15, one can note that: a. whenever there is thought, there is combination, i.e. b. combining representations is clearly understood as an activity of synthesis (or, in other words, from the fact that these combinations take place, one gets to an act of the understanding which operates syntheses); c. only the understanding in its spontaneity synthesises, which will lead to noting the (§16) qualitative unity of the “I think” underlying the process of thought; this qualitative unity is not, however, a representation, but must accompany every representation.

132 He grounds his analysis in the *Transcendental dialectics*, especially the *paralogisms* (A 341/B 339-340), where, he claims, the “I” cannot apprehended in itself or by itself [*saisi par lui-même*].
Canguilhem’s analysis of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, which is exactly a diagnosis of the exhaustion of the *Cogito*. Canguilhem stresses the difference between Descartes’ and Kant’s conceptions of the *Je pense*, showing how the latter marks the emergence of the modern *episteme* (in which we could situate the notion of life). If the Cartesian *I think* could be discovered through a method of introspection, Canguilhem shows that Kant reveals a categorial structure which, simultaneously, makes possible and escapes the field of representation. As he explains:

In a sense, Descartes’s invention of the *cogito* is not what constituted, for more than a century, the essential achievement of its inventor’s philosophy. Kant had to prosecute the *cogito* before the critical tribunal of the *I think* and deny it all substantialist import before modern philosophy could adopt the habit of referring to the *cogito* as the philosophic event that inaugurated it. The Kantian *I think*, a vehicle for the concepts of understanding, is a light that opens experience to its intelligibility. But this light comes from behind us, and we cannot turn around to face it. The transcendental subject of thoughts, like the transcendental object of experience, is an unknown. The originally synthetic unity of apperception constitutes, in ante-representative fashion, a restricted representation in the sense that it cannot have access to the ground in which it originates. Thus, unlike the Cartesian *cogito*, the *I think* is posited as an in-itself, without being able to grasp itself for itself. The *I* cannot know itself as Myself.

If this analogy is correct, then it would be impossible to grasp life in itself, outside of the field of experience it makes possible (that is, in the case of Foucault, outside of historical conditions of possibility for knowledge and politics). Instead of beginning with a concept of life and, then, analysing how it founds politics, knowledge or ethics (or makes them possible), the movement would be quite the opposite: it is because that there is a political, ethical or epistemological experience of life, that we can attempt to investigate what would mean to talk about (ethical, epistemological or political) life, trying to understand the structures organised around it. Life would be, like the Kantian ‘*I think*’, a light that illuminates our

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133 Si Canguilhem constitue selon Foucault la clef de voûte de toute une génération d’intellectuels, c’est que, comme nous allons tâcher de le montrer, il lui avait préparé le terrain. Avec Althusser ou Foucault, le sujet de la pensée est un sujet sans sujet. Or, il y a la une analogie avec le parcours de Canguilhem lui-même. Dans l’Essai sur quelques problèmes concernant le normal et le pathologique, ce n’est plus le sujet transcendental, pivot de l’approche réflexive, qui occupe le cœur de la réflexion philosophique. C’est la vie au sens biologique du terme. Pour reprendre les mots d’un autre disciple, François Dagognet, ‘la vie semble bien être ‘le Cogito’ de cette philosophie’” (Roth, *Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience*, 136).

134 Roth proposes an analogy between the function of understanding (*l’entendement*) in Kant and Canguilhem’s notion of life, which takes the place of the *Cogito*, the “*I think*” understood especially in Kantian perspective (*Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience*, 146).

experience, but which comes from behind our backs, being impossible for us to turn around and face it directly. Therefore, there can be no explicit philosophy of life, no explicit articulation of a concept of life in Foucault’s work, outside of specific historical configurations. Perhaps, this is because of the impossibility of speaking about ‘pure’ objects in Foucault’s perspective, that is, of situating objects without a network of relationality, in which one is always confronted to a certain specific configuration of forces in history, a certain configuration of power, of visibility and of knowledge.

If it is possible to see in the notion of life an unsolvable tension between historical and transcendental, as well as between power and resistance, it is also possible to see that these tensions correspond to a different one, which every reader of Foucault necessarily confronts. That is, namely, the tension between Foucault’s nominalism and the speculative and ontological or metaphysical grounds of his philosophical project, between historical production and a reality that escapes its exhaustion by historical analysis. Applying this logic, but from a political perspective, Foucault seem to be talking about a life that escapes power in the Will to Knowledge, while at the same time makes it possible. In the same passage where Foucault argues that life became the main object of power and politics, he also claims: “It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them”. Why it is possible to say that life escapes the mechanisms of power? How can we say that even while being the main substratum of power, life can still elude power mechanisms?

Since the enterprise of analysing Foucault’s idea of life seems to be to presuppose looking at the plurality of specific ways in which life appears or is constituted, my attempt will be to map the different ways in which life is configured under a certain regime of forces, government and knowledge – how does this concept appear in the historical correlations of forces, asking what makes it possible to talk about life in a certain point in history, and what

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136 I would like to leave a question for further investigation: is it the specificity of life to be something which escapes and exceeds? Would it be a variation of the theme regarding that which makes representation possible but is not representation or cannot be in itself represented? Or is it the nature of Foucault’s method not trying to scrutinise this life beyond the limits and conditions of possibility of historical configurations of forces and power? In this last hypothesis, we can trace the emergence of life as a historical ‘quasi-transcendental’ which delimits a field of possible knowledge, intelligibility and practice, but which we cannot grasp outside of the activities and practices in which it appears.

137 WK, 143.

138 I think that a good hypothesis is that Foucault’s concept of life is also on the basis of the possibilities of transformation of power structures, of articulation of forms of individual and collective counter-power, that is to say, life is the ground of resistance. As Foucault claims in WK, “against this power that was still new in the nineteenth century, the forces that resisted relied for support on the very thing it invested, that is, on life and man as a living being” (WK, 144).
does life, in its turn, make possible in a political field. Thus, in order to analyse Foucault’s idea of life, we must look at the way life appears in its different points of emergence in his work. How does he characterise these emergences? How do they interact? Are they marked by a continuity or discontinuity? Is there an implicit philosophical effort attached to the notion of life? Is it possible to articulate the philosophical grids, presuppositions and conceptual frameworks linked to it?

The proposition of reading Foucault’s work by establishing the problematics of life as one of its central aspects is not new. On the contrary, it has inspired a long line of interpreters, among whom we can mention at least four: Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben,139 Antonio Negri140 (also in collaboration with Hardt141 and Lazzarato)142 and Roberto Esposito.143 I will briefly show how the first three constitute a reading of Foucault based on a certain idea of life and vitalism.

Gilles Deleuze, in his Foucault, claimed that the latter’s work should be read through the lens of his vitalism; that understanding power and resistance in Foucault presupposed the understanding of his notion of life. Deleuze’s introduction of the notion vitalism closes the chapter “Strategies of the Non-stratified: The Thought of the Outside”, which is a philosophical exploration of the notion of power. Deleuze draws a picture of power as this dynamic, relational configuration relying on affects and forces, by means a reflection on the formation of specific diagrams of power in relation to the formless outside of forces.144

For Deleuze, the category of force has a certain priority over the specific configurations of different diagrams of power: “The diagram, as the fixed form of a set of relations between forces, never exhausts force, which can enter into new compositions. The diagram stems from the outside but the outside does not merge with any diagram, and

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143 Esposito. Bios: Biopolitica e filosofia. (Torino: Einaudi, 2004). On the readings of biopolitics by Agamben, Negri and Esposito, see Gentili & Stimilli, Differenze italiane (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2015); Esposito, Da fuori (Torino: Einaudi, 2016), especially chapter IV. It is interesting to see how the notion of life as a creative, expansive, productive reality will be the defining element of an affirmative biopolitics (which prioritises resistance over the power over life), which characterises what is being called, in the Anglophone scholarship, “Italian Theory”.
144 Deleuze, Foucault, 59-60.
continues instead to ‘draw’ new ones”. In this sense, Deleuze argues that resistance has a direct relation with the outside from which all diagrams emerge (whereas power operates within a diagram), which leads him to write the famous sentence: “Moreover, the final word about power is that resistance comes first”. The complexity of this philosophical reading of Foucault’s work would be worth of a more detailed discussion; however, what I would like to stress by mentioning this philosophical framework, is a way to think resistance as creative and productive (in contrast with a power that operates in more limited way within the space of certain diagrams), which sets the bases for Deleuze’s understanding of Foucault’s “vitalism” as a thought of resistance. This is because “when power takes life as its aim or object, then resistance to power already puts itself on the side of life, and turns it against power”. Referring to Spinoza and Nietzsche, Deleuze underlines the affirmative aspect of the forces of life, and claims that: “Life becomes resistance to power when power takes life as its object (...) When power becomes bio-power, resistance becomes the power [puissance] of life, a vital power that cannot be confined within species, environment or path of a particular diagram”. It is exactly in this reflection that Deleuze situates the importance of Foucault’s concept of Life and the reading of Foucault’s thought culminating in a form of vitalism:

Is it not the force coming from the outside a certain idea of Life, a certain vitalism, in which Foucault’s thought culminates? Is it not life the capacity to resist force? From the Birth of the Clinic on, Foucault admired Bichat for having invented a new vitalism by defending life as the set of those functions which resist death.

That life occupies an important position in the philosophical debate today might be one of Foucault’s most important contributions. In “Absolute Immanence”, Agamben claims that Foucault’s text on Canguilhem (“Life: Experience and Science”) points to a different way of thinking the subject, exceeding lived experience and the “intentionality of phenomenology”. He explains that Foucault’s new definition of “life as error” or errancy is part of a new path of his investigation on subjectivity. As Agamben says, “Tearing the subject from the terrain of the cogito and consciousness, this experience roots it in life”. He explains:

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145 Deleuze, *Foucault*, 74.
146 Deleuze, *Foucault*, 74.
147 Deleuze, *Foucault*, 76.
148 Deleuze, *Foucault*, 77.
149 Deleuze, *Foucault*, 77.
151 Agamben, *Potentialities*, 221.
It is clear that what is at issue in Foucault is not simply an epistemological adjustment but, rather, another dislocation of the theory of knowledge, one that opens onto entirely unexplored terrain. And it is precisely this terrain, which coincides with the field of biopolitics, that could have furnished Foucault with the ‘third axis, distinct from both knowledge and power’, which Deleuze suggests he needed, and which the essay on Canguilhem defines in limine as “a different way of approaching the notion of life”.\(^{152}\)

By bringing together Deleuze’s idea of a radically immanent life and Foucault’s idea of life as error, Agamben claims that the question of life has become one of the main questions for modern philosophy. He notes that Deleuze and Foucault’s last texts – which for him is the sign of a philosophical legacy – thematised the notion of life, opening a new horizon for a philosophical investigation organised around the concept of life.\(^{153}\) Agamben identifies a point of inflection in modern philosophy, characterised by the insight that a ‘philosophy of the future’ will be a philosophy of life.\(^{154}\)

In his rereading of biopolitics, Antonio Negri (in his writings with Michael Hardt and Maurizio Lazzarato) reclaims Foucault’s work, when establishing a distinction between Power (potere) and power (potenza), between a power over life (biopower) and a vital power (biopolitics), life’s power of affirmation, creation, transformation.\(^{155}\) As he writes in Multitude, with Michael Hardt: “Biopower stands above society, transcendent, as a sovereign authority and imposes its order. Biopolitical production, in contrast, is immanent to society and creates social relationships and forms through collaborative forms of labour”.\(^{156}\) Negri somehow continues and extends Deleuze’s interpretation, positing life as a productive principle, beyond the configurations of the power that manage and exploit it. This extension of Deleuze’s interpretation is operated through a theoretical displacement, appropriating Foucault’s theoretical work through the framework of a particular line within Italian Marxism, namely operaismo (“workerism”) and, more specifically Mario Tronti.\(^{157}\)

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\(^{152}\) Agamben, Potentialities, 221.

\(^{153}\) It is curious to note that Foucault’s text on life is, precisely, a text on Canguilhem (a first version was written in 1978, and it will serve as the preface for the English edition of Canguilhem’s The Normal and The Pathological. A modified version appeared in the Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale in 1985 (DE2, text 361). There is a historical inaccuracy in Agamben’s claim. However, this 1978 text is one of the last revised by Foucault for publication.


\(^{155}\) See Lazzarato, “From Biopower to Biopolitics”.

\(^{156}\) Negri & Hardt, Multitude, 121.

\(^{157}\) Cf. Tronti, Opera e capitale (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2013). The idea that “resistance comes first” could be read from the perspective of Tronti (through an analogy between capital and power; worker’s struggles and resistance). The priority Tronti he gives to workers’ struggle and class organisation with regards to the capitalist organisation of production (that is, an idea that class struggle and workers’ ‘agency’ is not only a response to capitalist exploitation, but it actually forces, provokes, pushes it to
All these readings, despite being often appropriative, highlight this problematic of life in Foucault’s work as one of its most precious philosophical accomplishments. By taking different paths, these three thinkers highlight the political and ethical aspects of life.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that, in her work on the epistemology of the life sciences and biology, Portocarrero identifies three main moments of the treatment of the notion life in Foucault’s work, understanding this notion as a sort of guiding thread of his research. The first would be situated in the 1960s, mainly in *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things*; the second, in the 1970s, with *Discipline and Punish* and *Will to Knowledge*; finally, the third would be the moment of the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, and in the “many talks and interviews, as also in the lecture courses of the last years of his life”, which she isolates as not being the main object of her analysis. I believe that the identification of these three lines valid, but it could assume the tripartite chronological schema that I have criticised before, as if politicised life, life as the material for ethical elaboration and life as the object of the life sciences could not communicate, or as if they were not intimately related. My question is precisely the one regarding the possible ways in which they communicate. In contrast with Portocarrero, my thesis focus mainly on two concepts of life, two moments of problematisation of life, that emerge in Foucault’s work, trying to understand their relation: life in biopolitics – i.e. life as an object of power relations, regulation, normalisation, etc. – and life as the material for self-elaboration, for the constitution of a way of life. The main question guiding my research concerns the continuity or discontinuity between these two views on the politics of life, namely biopolitics and *way of life* or *bio-technique*. If Portocarrero’s emphasis was on the link between the history of the life sciences and the constitution of life as an object of knowledge, on the one hand, and life as one of the main objects of power, on the other; my specific contribution is to articulate the problem of the continuity between biopolitics and the exploration of the techniques of life in Foucault’s works in the 1980s. My question concerns the politicisation of life in biopolitics and in *bio-techniques*, which will allow me to investigate both power and resistance in relation to life.

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My starting point is, then, the question about the politicisation of life in the framework of discipline and biopolitics, as well as the terrain for creation of modes of life, that is for the institution of new norms and forms of subjectivation. It is from the perspective of the arts of life, of a technique of life (in tension with the technologies of power) that I will discuss the notion of subjectivation. To do this, I identify a line of continuity between these two moments – or two ways of problematising life – in relation to the concept of norm, as expressing different relations to norms and different concepts of norms. My hermeneutical effort will be to show that both biopolitics and a bio-techniques can be thought through the concept of norm and as different forms of relating to norms. As I show in Parts II and III, there are different ways understanding norms, but I would like to stress, for now, the sense of norms as a mode of being, a way of positioning oneself in relation to positive and negative values one experiences. The norm is an immanent form of behaviour, which limits life while at the same time opens a field of possible experiences. Norms connect behaviour, values and ways of being. As we will see, norms can also be the response to the experience or perception of a certain negativity, as certain deprivation or deficiency: in this sense, the norm would be like a rule, or would refer to the Latin norma, as a criterion of measurement, of correction and straightening. A norm, in this sense, would presuppose a certain degree of exteriority in relation to the object it acts upon. The idea will be, then, regarding each configuration of the relation between life and power, how does the norm operate and is characterised. In certain ways, there would be a continuity between biopolitics and bio-technique since both presuppose a relation between life and norms, but the kind of norms and their different forms of action is what makes possible to distinguish the two.

In order to illustrate, but also to philosophically ground and further articulate this relationship between life and norms, my specific contribution consists in mobilising Canguilhem’s work, providing a perspective on the idea of bio-technique as the creation of norms of life. Canguilhem will be introduced not in order to trace the formation of Foucault’s thought in a sort of historical account of a philosophical influence. Although Foucault mentions the importance of epistemologists and historians of science in several occasions – referring to names as Alaxandre Koyré, Gaston Bachelard, Jean Cavaillès and Canguilhem – for a critical history of rationality (or regional rationalities) my idea is to use Canguilhem’s work, especially his notions of vital and social normativity, to interpret Foucault’s work. Different authors have already shown the key role that the French school of epistemology

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160 In DE2, 432, Foucault argues that the French history of science extends the concerns of the Aufklärung. See also DE2, 1254-1257.
and history of science have had in the development of Foucault’s archaeology.\footnote{161} Although this element is very important to understand Foucault’s project contextually, my proposition is a different one. Following a path inaugurated by Macherey in 1989,\footnote{162} I intend to use Canguilhem as a lens through which to look at Foucault’s work – the proposition is, then, reading Foucault with Canguilhem. The introduction of Canguilhem will allow me to think of Foucault’s explorations of \textit{bio-technique} as a research on the possibilities of creation of norms of life (that challenge the way norms function within the framework of biopower). From this association, two other analytical tools are extracted: these different ways relation between life and norms point to (i) different forms of governing life, whose variety is expressed by Foucault. The second will be (ii) the notion of subjectivity understood as relation to norms, under Macherey’s orientation that being a subject presupposes being a subject of norms, under certain norms, or to norms.\footnote{163} In this way, the notions of government and subjectivity (subjection and subjectivation) will shed light on how life functions in the different moments of analysis: discipline and biopolitics and the \textit{techne tou biou}. As I will explain, for each of these forms of politicisation of life, I will apply a grid of intelligibility which describes them in terms of \textit{norm} (how is it understood? What are its predominant operations and forms of action?), \textit{government} (what are the operations for acting upon actions and conducting conducts that are mobilised?) and \textit{subjectivity} (what are the predominant forms of constitution of subjects in each of these settings?).

\section*{1.2. Emergences of Life: From Discipline and Biopolitics to Bio-technique}

My investigation begins by situating two different theoretical moments in Foucault’s treatment of the notion of life and, more specifically, two different lines which express and describe how life is politicised in his work. As I will attempt to explain in this thesis, in both moments, it is possible to note a certain relationship between life and \textit{norms} and between life and \textit{government}. These two concepts – as well as a third line of problematisation, that of \textit{subjectivity} (understood in its duality, as subjectivation and subjection) – will occupy a central, structural, place in our discussion of Foucault’s notions of life. Putting it differently, my attempt is to investigate the notion of life by its positionality in relation to the coordinates of \textit{norms}, \textit{governmentality} and \textit{subjectivity}. As mentioned above, I believe these three

\footnote{161} See Part II.
elements constitute important variants to form a grid of intelligibility broad enough to encompass apparently discontinuous moments of Foucault’s work, with hermeneutical insight regarding the persistence of certain lines of problematisation along the different methodological and thematic configurations of Foucault’s approach. In the following chapters, I will problematise each of these concepts, investigating and justifying their place in Foucault’s work and the hermeneutical role I attribute to them in my thesis.

The two lines in Foucault’s political problematisation of life that I propose to analyse are, [1] the encounter (and co-production) of life and power in apparatuses and discourses of discipline and biopolitics, and [2] the emergence, in the so-called late Foucault, of the constitution of ways of life expressed in the notion of the arts of living, what I designate under the rubric of bio-technique. In each one of these moments, norms, governmentality and subjectivity differently relate to one another, in a mobile triangulation which differently constitutes a politics of life.

Additionally, I believe it is possible to group these theoretical moments under a more general concept of what we could call a movement of politicisation of life in Foucault’s work. This notion is an interesting methodological tool to the extent it allows us to read also the works that both precede the publication of Discipline and Punish and History of Sexuality – such as The Birth of the Clinic – and the work that follows the so-called ‘genealogical period’, allegedly marking a turning point in Foucault’s thought, such as the lecture courses of the 1980s, and, especially, the last three volumes of the History of Sexuality.

The first moment in our analysis of Foucault’s politicisation of life is marked by the entrance of the living body – with its forces and energies – in the field of politics, on the one hand; and by the appearance of a new political object, the population, the collective life of the population, on the other: “a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted”.164 It is possible to point to, at least, three textual moments which reflect this centrality of the living body and the life dynamics of the population, respectively.

The first appears is “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”.165 In this context, the politicisation of life is formulated in terms of a more general philosophical framework in which living bodies, forces and event are joined together in a genealogical history of the body, which is constituted by Foucault in a close reading of Nietzsche. It is possible to say that this

164 SMD, 245.
165 DE1, text 84.
text corresponds to what Oksala (2010) calls “Foucault’s politicisation of ontology”. This is perhaps an atypical text in terms of Foucault’s use of philosophy, taking the form of a philosophical exegesis, surreptitiously formulating philosophical grounds and methodological perspectives. Genealogy is here formulated by referring to the body as a surface of an inscription of events and forces, the body as a reality which is product of a political history, which Blencowe clearly expressed when defined genealogy as “a history constituted in embodied struggle, strategy, combat and resistance”.

The second, is Discipline and Punish, and the third is the Will to Knowledge. These, which are published books, open two fields of political problematisation of life. In terms of Foucault’s books – concluded and published during his lifetime –, they constitute the main sources to an understanding of the emergence of both an anatomopolitics and a biopolitics, that is, the constitution of power dispositifs established over the body of living individuals and populations, or, in other words, the productive living body of the individual and the life and health of the population as new political categories which articulate life and politics.

If, from a theoretical perspective, we seem to be referring to two correlative aspects of a same process of the politicisation of life, namely the individual living body and the life of a population, Foucault’s last lecture in the 1975-1976 Collège de France course Society Must be Defended sheds light both on the structural and historical differences between disciplinary power, on the one hand, and biopower, on the other. In this sense, the first moment of the politicisation of life could be further divided into [i] “discipline” (which we could tentatively situate chronologically around 1974 or 1975, with the publication of Discipline and Punish, although this line of though is present in earlier studies and lecture courses) and [ii] “biopolitics” (with the formulation of a concept of biopower, with the publication of the Will to Knowledge, in 1976). The latter is clearly preceded by the notion of “somatocracy” [“somatocratie”], employed in a lecture in Rio de Janeiro in 1974.

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166 Oksala, “Foucault’s Politicization of Ontology”, Continental Philosophy Review, vol.43, 4, 2010, 445-466. According to Oksala, the “ontological order of things is in itself the outcome of a political struggle: ontology is the politics that has forgotten itself” (445). She adds: “What I am advocating is an ontological inquiry into to the way in which reality is instituted reveals this institution as a political process” (447). In this sense, “the political is not a distinct domain of social reality, but its precondition: it concerns the contestation and struggle over the institution and disclosure of reality” (447).

167 Blencowe, Biopolitical Experience, 6.

168 WK, 139. See also SMD, 17 March 1976.

169 “On pourrait dire qu’a surgi dans l’actualité ce qui en réalité se préparait depuis le XVIIIe siècle, c’est-à-dire (...) une ‘somatocratie’ Nous vivons sous un régime pour lequel l’une des finalités de l’intervention étatique est le soin du corps, la santé corporelle, la relation entre la maladie et la santé,
two axes are distinguishable (chronologically, in *Society Must be Defended*, and ‘technologically’ in the *Will to Knowledge*), but they are nonetheless complementary lines of the politicisation of life.

*Discipline and Punish* represents an important moment in Foucault’s thought, a moment of methodological synthesis concerning the notions of power and its operations, as well as a further extension on the investigation of the emergence of human sciences, now explicitly connected to a certain technology of punishment and examination. The importance of this book for my investigation is twofold. First, it stresses a transition from a power which functions negatively, whose greatest expression of activity would be to kill, to take life, to a power which works with maintaining and defending life, operating through correction and normalisation. The issue of normalisation takes us to the second issue which my approach finds in *Discipline and Punish*, namely, the centrality of the norm as one of the main ways of explaining the functioning of power, as well as the explicit reference to Georges Canguilhem.\footnote{DP, 184.} *Discipline and Punish* will be, then, foundational in the sense of articulating the conception of a power concerned with control and correction of living individuals, rather that the demonstration of its surplus by killing individuals who are most of the time invisible to the sovereign. The maintenance, control and correction of living individuals is what leads to Foucault to articulate a concept of norm which will ground his analysis of normalisation.

It is through an analysis of the changes in the Western technologies of punishment in the Classical Age that Foucault will reintroduce a fundamental insight from “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, namely, a history of the body. As Foucault writes:

> Historians long ago began to write a history of the body. They have studied the body in the field of historical demography or pathology; they have considered it as the seat of needs and appetites, as the locus of physiological processes and metabolisms, as a target for the attack of germs or viruses; they have shown to what extent historical processes were involved in what might seem to be the purely biological base of existence; and what place should be given in the history of society to biological ‘events’ such as the circulation of bacilli, or the extension of the life-span.\footnote{DP, 25.}

When analysing this passage, it is possible to note, that Foucault’s formulation of a history of the body – and of a “political economy of the body”\footnote{DP, 25.} – is in correlation with a historical consideration of the life biology involved in historical processes, or, putting it etc. C’est précisément la naissance de cette somaocratie, en crise depuis le début, que je me propose d’analyser” (DE2, 43).
differently, the history of a society which also presupposes its biology. This is the notion of a “bio-history” which will be a key element in the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, as he stresses in “Bio-histoire et bio-politique”.¹⁷³ In this sense, we can read in the *Will to Knowledge*:

If one can apply the term *bio-history* to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.¹⁷⁴

However, once the importance of living processes – the living body – is acknowledged in historical analysis, Foucault gives a next step, which again recovers his text on Nietzsche: the political dimension, that is, the conflicts, relations of forces, domination, coercion that surround the living body. Foucault eloquently expresses this next step in the following way: “But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks”.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, this political investment is immediately linked to the economic use of the body and the operation of its productive forces. As Foucault explains, the constitution of the body as “labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (…); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a useful body”.¹⁷⁶ What I would like to stress here is the twofold aspect of Foucault’s formulation of *Discipline and Punish* as a case study within the broader framework of the history of the body, which leads us directly to a process of politicisation of life. First, Foucault refers to the biological aspect of (social) history, situating the body in the framework of its biological processes (“physiological processes”, “metabolisms”, “germs”, “bacilli”, etc). That is to say, Foucault situates his own project in relation to what we could call a “bio-history”. Second, without excluding or superseding this level, Foucault claims that the body is *also* immediately situated in a political field. The injunction expressed by “also” proposes this history of the body as an analysis of life as a political object. In other words, it situates the history of the technologies over the individual body within the framework of a politicisation of life.

¹⁷³ This text reproduces Foucault’s review of Ruffié’s book *De la biologie à la culture*. In *Discipline and Punish*, published a year before, the main reference for thinking the relation of biological life and social history is *Le Roy-Ladurie*. In his reading of Ruffié, Foucault introduces the notion of a “bio-history” (against a racist conception of human populations).
¹⁷⁴ *WK*, 143.
¹⁷⁵ *DP*, 25.
¹⁷⁶ *DP*, 25.
Despite of Foucault’s emphasis in *Society Must be Defended* on fundamental difference between the works developed in terms of an anatomopolitics of the individual and a biopolitics of the population, *Discipline and Punish* already pointed to this concept. It did so, however, from the perspective of the *multiplicity* of individual bodies or, as Foucault puts it: “that multiplicity of bodies and forces that constitutes a population”. Its analysis was predominantly centred on the individual body, which would be the base to understand the production of an “obedient subject”, a docile body which is the place for the production of “the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders”. *Discipline and Punish* highlights, therefore, the notion of a “political anatomy” which works on the body “in retail and individually”, through individual training, and the production of habits and internalisation of behaviours. In the context of punishment, this process of shaping obedient individual bodies “reclaims the convicts individually” through a constant control, monitoring or what Foucault will refer to as a “concerted orthopedy”, understood as an art of preventing deviations and correcting them, when they occur.

Differently, in the *Will to Knowledge*, Foucault analyses the emergence of a new technology of power over the population understood as sort of *sui generis* political object. As in *Discipline and Punish*, the power exercised is no longer characterised by a radical right of seizure and operations of deduction “of things, time, bodies, and (...) life itself”, but rather a form of power that works to “incite, enforce, control, monitor, optimise, and organise the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them”. This new form is that of a power over life and its dynamics. Simultaneously, “anatomic and biological, individualising and specifying, directed toward the performances of the body, with attention to the processes of life”, this power finds its highest function no longer in killing, but in investing “life through and through”.

Power becomes *biopower*, a form of mastery of living beings, or, as Habermas puts it, a power confiscates the whole organism. As Foucault writes: “For millennia, man

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177 DP, 77-78.
178 DP, 129.
179 DP, 138.
180 DP, 130.
181 See DP, plate 10.
182 WK, 135.
183 WK, 136.
184 WK, 139.
185 WK, 143.
remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question”.\textsuperscript{187} In the \textit{Will to Knowledge}, however, this power finds in the \textit{dispositif} of sexuality a mediation between the individual body (since it gives access to individual behaviour) and the collective living body of the population (since it gives access to general processes traversing a population, such as natality, mortality and reproduction).

The entrance of our living being in politics does not consist only in the politicisation of our very biological processes, nor in the administration of life by the state and institutions. Foucault’s work gradually develops, including a problematisation about the ways we can govern and shape our own lives. He refers to a “very real process of struggle, life as political object (...) taken [at face value] and turned back against the system that was bent on controlling it”.\textsuperscript{188}

In this sense, the second moment in this general idea of Foucault’s politicisation of treatment of life could be situated in his work on the history of ethics and the modes of subjectivation, in which the main concepts are articulated around the problem of creating, composing, shaping one’s life. Maintaining the important insight about the intensive relationship of life and force, or life and power, Foucault now looks at the way in which life could be shaped – or governed – not by technologies of power, disciplinary or State institutions, but by the subject herself through an art, a technique, and a series of exercises and tests. It is life as the material for a creative labour of self-constitution, or putting it differently, life “as an object of difficult and complex elaboration”.\textsuperscript{189}

In his \textit{Collège de France} lecture courses of the 1980s, Foucault clearly understands life as \textit{bios}, analysing it by a set of practices which constitute the \textit{arts of life} or, as he will define them in 1982, as \textit{bio-techniques} (and here we can already identify a series of inter-related concepts that gravitate around the notion of life: \textit{bio-history}, \textit{bio-power} and \textit{bio-techniques}). If, in the \textit{Will to Knowledge}, life appeared through its interrelations with a power that manages and acts upon it, in later concepts – such as \textit{bio-techniques} and \textit{techne peri bion} – life appears as the correlate of a technique, or the forms of action one exercises upon oneself and upon others. In both cases, life is related to technologies and forms of action that work upon it, but in very different ways. In 1982, life is, then, the material, the condition

\textsuperscript{187} WK, 143.  
\textsuperscript{188} WK, 145.  
\textsuperscript{189} FR, 41.
and the result or the product of this technique, of the art that works upon it. In the second
lecture of the 1981 course *Subjectivity and Truth*, Foucault explains that the *bios* is:

> [L]ife that can be qualified, life with its accidents, its necessities, but also the
> life one may make oneself, decide oneself. *Bios* is what happens to us, of
> course, but from the angle of what we do with what happens to us. It is the
> course of existence, but in the light of the fact that this course is inseparably
> linked to the possibility of managing it, transforming it, directing it in this or
> that direction (...). *Bios* is the correlative of the possibility of modifying one’s
> life, of modifying it in a rational fashion and according to the principles of
> the art of living. All these arts, all these *technai* that the Greeks, and the
> Latins after them, developed so much, these arts of living bear on *bios*, on
> that part of life that falls under a possible technique, a considered and
> rational transformation. [...] They called this art of living [...] *techne peri
> bion*—the *techne* that is applied to life, the technique that concerns
> existence understood as a life to be led, the technique that enables this life
> to be fashioned.\(^{190}\)

This series of reflections on *bios* seems to culminate, in 1984, in the final lectures of
the *Courage of the Truth*, in the ideas of “true life” and “other life” [*vie autre*], and
particularly with the possibility of continuing to unfold the line of enquiry that Foucault
characterises then as “the history of the arts of living”.\(^{191}\)

However, at first sight and although expressing the continuity of a *problem*, the
notions of life that emerge in these different moments seem discontinuous. The relation
between the concept of life which appears in *biopolitics* and the one presupposed in the
notion of *form of life* seems to be one of mere *homonymy*, for the word ‘life’ seems to
designate objects and processes which are different in nature and set apart historically.
Moreover, in the works he published during his lifetime, Foucault has not systematically
explored the articulation, the point of contact, between his analysis of the ancient
philosophical ways of life, on the one hand, and the present context of biopower and
normalisation of the living, on the other. We are, thus, apparently confronted with two
strikingly different treatments of the notion of life, one biological and the other
fundamentally ethical. However, if these ways of understanding and analysing the politics of
life appear as diametrically opposed at the first sight, a more attentive observation would
help us inaugurating a problematic zone, in which we would also find continuities.

To summarise, we find the politicisation of life develops in two main lines in
Foucault’s work: that of life as object, material, terrain of power operations and that of life

\(^{190}\) ST, 34.

\(^{191}\) CT, 316.
as an object of techniques of self-constitution. My guiding hypothesis is that both can be described through Canguilhem’s conceptual framework. First, the technique of life could be understood as the activity of creation of norms. As Roth points out, technique has a direct relation with the invention and test of norms as a response of the living to certain obstacles, hindrances and experiences of precarity and limitation. Canguilhem, in the first pages of the *Normal and the Pathological*, justifies his study of medicine (which he will understand as an art in the ancient sense of *ars* or *techne*) through its pertinence to a study of the relations between technique, science, life and norms. I believe we could apply the same reasoning to Foucault’s notion of *techne tou biou*, or bio-technique (in this sense, ancient philosophy would occupy for the 1980s Foucault a similar place that medicine occupies for Canguilhem: roughly speaking, as a concrete terrain for understanding the workings of norms). Second, disciplinary and biopolitical power could be seen as the flipside of techniques applied to life, which rely on the mobilisation of norms, and its main form of action would be controlling, monitoring and intervening in general processes of normalisation. Power limits the creation of norms, while at the same time, the norms it creates configure spaces of positivity and productivity. The mobilisation of the norm here would project the analysis of power on a whole different level, beyond the exteriority of laws, State and juridical apparatuses into the very function of individual and collective behaviour, deviances, regularities. Power also creates norms, and the operations of normalisation denote both the relative flexibility of its own norms, being able to re-assimilate deviance and the activity of sanction which restores the norm, reconducting the individual or the statistical trends of the population back to the norm.

The line of analysis centred on power over life, subdivides in two different aspects or general frameworks or configurations of power: discipline and biopolitics. After our first sketch of the ways in which these three lines of politicisation of life operate, how could we characterise them in relation to norms? We will return to the particularities of these two forms – namely judgement of normality and correction of the individual, on the one hand, and monitoring of the population and intervention to regulate collective processes represented in statistic terms – in Part III. However, I would like to roughly sketch some of the differences I consider most striking between the forms in which these forms of power mobilise the norm.

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To put it schematically, in *Discipline and Punish*, we have a history of the political economy of the body in which power is exercised not only through the juridical apparatus, but through a form of operation which is constant, disseminated, and infinitesimal. Discipline is the internalisation of norms, which encompass human behaviour: it is a power that passes through individual living bodies. It marks the transition of power that functions through the law to a power that functions through the norm; as practices of correction and *orthopedia* attest in *Discipline and Punish* (plate 10). Discipline signs the emergence of subjectivity as a product of practices of power, the emergence of the modern subject as subject to norms, through concrete practices of normation, normatisation and normalisation, which operate through constant surveillance, vigilance, examination, auscultation of the individual in detail. The integral behaviour of the individual is submitted to a judgement of normality, but also each part of his body, in detail, is related to an optimum, to a prescription of operation.

In *biopower*, on the other hand, the main terrain of the operations of power is not the infinitesimally detailed manipulated and examined individual body, but rather the general collective living process of the population. It is a “somatocracy”, extended over the collective body of the population, which will be understood and controlled according to norms of health, growth, controlled variation. This form of power operates through regulation of trends and statistic tendencies. In this framework, the relation between life and norms is regulation (e.g. public health policies, reproduction, natality mortality). These two forms, individual and collective, are not opposed, but as Foucault explains in different texts, such as *Omnes et singulatim*, both compose a complex dispositive of power over life. In the *Will to Knowledge*, this point of articulation is the dispositive of sexuality, because it gives access to the control of individual norms of behaviour while at the same time being an important tool to intervene in the vital dynamics of the population.

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In order to shed new light upon the concept of norm, which as I suggested can be used to describe different modes of government and the politicisation of life in Foucault’s work, I propose an analysis of Canguilhem’s *The Normal and the Pathological*. This book, originally his medicine thesis, can provide an interesting perspective for a reading of Foucault’s

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194 DE2, text 291; EW3, 322.
research, since its core – through a discussion of the nature and place of the pathological in life – is precisely the relation between life and norm.

In Canguilhem, we will find the elements for establishing a key conceptual distinction regarding the ways in which life relates to norms. On the one hand, Canguilhem can provides us with the tools for a reading of a notion of *normalisation* – as the establishment of a normalising space and the stabilisation and crystallisation of particular norms, a field in which deviations must be addressed and corrected or, in a word, normalised. The notion of *normativity*, on the other hand, which is linked to Canguilhem’s concept of life, expresses the existence of a normative force within life, which is able to break and establish norms. The interpretive key that I propose to apply to Foucault’s work, therefore, this distinction between *normativity* (understood as the creation and experimentation with norms) and *normalisation* (as the processes that reduce living beings, social actors or practices to a pre-established norm).

Through this distinction, I believe we can think of new ways of establishing lines of continuity between the different moments of Foucault’s analyses of the politicisation of life. In particular, by mobilising this methodological ‘monism’ of the norm, I contend, we can re-situate Foucault’s biopolitical explorations and his analyses of the ancient techniques of life in a same territory, avoiding certain interpretive traps, such as the projection of an opposition between *bíos* and *zoé* to Foucault’s work. All life, we will see, is lived, expressed, regulated and known through the frame of norms.

My exposition of Canguilhem’s work will, first of all, be an essential step for this articulation of a different interpretation of Foucault. It will allow us to think more generally about life and norms as a philosophical problem in a time when life is, once again, at the centre of theoretical and political debates.

Canguilhem is usually read as a historian of science and an epistemologist. What I propose in this thesis is to read Canguilhem as a philosopher – *tout court* (concerned with ontology, ethics and politics). My presentation of his ideas is linked to a close reading of the *Normal and the Pathological*: through this attention to the text, my goal is to reveal the philosophical gestures and positions underlying Canguilhem’s history of science. I also see in this close reading as a way to introduce Canguilhem – or, at least, certain aspects of his work – to an Anglophone reader. This is a timely concern, since some of Canguilhem’s early

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writings, which reveal his early philosophical allegiances, are still in process of publication with the release of his complete works in French. Additionally, up to now, there has been no systematic study on Canguilhem’s philosophy and, during the writing of this thesis, the first to books exclusively dedicated to Canguilhem in English have been finished and recently published (or forthcoming). In this sense, the developments on Canguilhem I offer in the next chapter thesis should be seen as part of this renewed interest in his work in English.

Before turning to an analysis of Canguilhem’s work, however, I will first explore the relation between Foucault and Canguilhem, challenging some of the simplifications found in existing scholarship.

196 Volumes I and IV and V have already been published. The latter, by the end of 2018.
197 Stuart Elden, Canguilhem, Cambridge: Polity, 2019 (forthcoming); Samuel Talcott, Georges Canguilhem and the Problem of Error. Palgrave, 2019. Unfortunately, my work could not benefit from these books, since it was already written before their publication.
In June 1965, Foucault sent Canguilhem a letter, acknowledging an intellectual debt:

When I began to work, ten years ago, I did not know you – not your books. But the things I have done since, I certainly would not have done had I not read you. You have had a great impact on [my work]. I cannot describe to you precisely how, nor precisely where, nor what my “method” owes to you; but you should be aware that even, and especially, my “counterpositions” – for example, on vitalism – are possible only on the basis of what you have done, on this layer of analysis introduced by you, on this epistemological eidetic that you invented. Actually, the *Clinique* and what follows it derive from this and, perhaps, are completely contained within it. Someday I shall have to come to grips with exactly what this relationship is.\(^{198}\)

As we can see, in 1965, Foucault could not make explicit the role that Canguilhem played in the development of his own research. Nevertheless, and despite the emphatic tone and a possible exaggeration, it is clear in the letter that he sees his own work as grounded in what Canguilhem had done.

Indeed, in many ways, Canguilhem was a key figure in Foucault’s intellectual trajectory, not only from the theoretical and philosophical perspective, but also from a biographical and academic point of view. Canguilhem was present in some of the most important ‘milestones’ of the intellectual path of the early Foucault. For example, he was part of the panel assessing the students at the admission exam to the École Normale Supérieure in 1946 – the year in which Foucault was admitted after a failing the exam of the previous year.\(^{199}\) Years later, Canguilhem, is part of another panel of examiners, that of the agrégation, which in France is a necessary step for becoming philosophy teacher.\(^{200}\) Finally, around 1960, it is Canguilhem who accepts to ‘supervise’ Foucault’s already finished doctoral thesis, then entitled *Folie et déraison*.\(^{201}\) A few years later, with the polemics caused by the publication of *The Order of Things*, Canguilhem was one of the few thinkers to publicly defend the work of his interlocutor against the attacks of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de

\(^{198}\) Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, 175. Eribon mentions Foucault’s correspondence with Canguilhem in the context of commenting on Canguilhem’s advice to Foucault not to apply for a position at the Sorbonne in 1965, when Foucault considered leaving the University of Clermont-Ferrand (246).


\(^{200}\) Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, 70; Macey, *The Lives*, 45.

Beauvoir and the intellectuals grouped around *Les Temps Modernes*. In each of these central and defining moments of Foucault’s philosophical trajectory, Canguilhem was present and played an important role.

In his acknowledgement in the 1965 letter, Foucault seems to suggest that one of the keys to understand his own work lies in Canguilhem’s, but this key is not yet fully apparent – not even to himself. While recognising the existence of such a theoretical relationship and the fact that he cannot precisely describe it yet, Foucault suggests that “perhaps” one day he would be able to “come to grips with what the relationship is”. My contention is that an attempt to do this is implicitly present throughout Foucault’s work and, as I will show, is explicitly delineated in one of the last texts Foucault revised in his lifetime, and which draws on an earlier version from 1978, “Life: Experience and Science”.

I believe that Foucault’s letter constitutes an important perspective on his own work, which points to a theoretical commonality. Most importantly, it opens a field of enquiry, based on questions Foucault was not able to answer: how does Canguilhem’s work affects his own work? How can we define and articulate this fundamental relationship? These questions, raised by Foucault in 1965, must be the starting point to think the theoretical relationship between the two philosophers.

Indeed, following the suggestion of Foucault’s letter, and trying to “come to grips with what the relationship is”, we begin to note a discrete but constant reference to Canguilhem in Foucault’s books. These references are far from being marginal or accessory; rather, as I will show, they are of key importance for the development of Foucault’s research. Furthermore, these occurrences are not necessarily linked to mere methodological developments, as Machado and Gutting and perhaps Foucault himself initially believed.

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203 A summary of this importance can be found in Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, especially 173-178.
204 EW2, 465-478; NP, “introduction”; DE2, texts 219 (for the 1978 version) and 361 (for the 1985 version).
205 Roberto Machado was Foucault’s student and a pioneer in exploring his relation to the tradition of French historical epistemology and history of science. His contribution appears in the 1989 volume, edited by François Ewald, *Foucault Philosophe*, which gathers the interventions at a symposium which took place one year before, organised by Canguilhem. See Roberto Machado, “Archaeology and Epistemology”, in *Foucault, Philosopher* (Edited by Ewald and translated by Armstrong, Hampstead: Harvester Wheatshead, 1992, 3-19). Additionally, Machado wrote a thesis (which he defended in 1981 at the Université Catholique de Louvain) entitled *Science et savoir. La trajectoire de l’archéologie de Foucault*. The thesis was published in Portuguese in 1982 (Cf. Machado, *Ciência e Saber. A trajetória da arqueologia de Michel Foucault*). The first part of this book on Foucault is dedicated to what Machado calls the “epistemological history of Georges Canguilhem”. 206 As we will see, one of the first ways to explore this field of intersection and exchange between Foucault and Canguilhem is to think of Foucault’s method at the time as indebted to Canguilhem’s
On the contrary, Foucault’s explicit references to Canguilhem can also be found in his formulation of new hypotheses. As I shall stress in what follows, Foucault’s explicit references to Canguilhem thematise the centrality of the norm and the pivotal role this concept plays in Foucault’s theoretical framework and his notion of power. In this sense, not only is Canguilhem’s method important for Foucault’s archaeology and genealogy, but also for the articulation of his conceptual apparatus, as well as for the choice of the objects of analysis. In this sense, my emphasis is not on Canguilhem’s method in the history of science and its importance for Foucault’s research, but on their commonality regarding a network of concepts articulated around the notions of norm and normativity.

This line of interpretation is important in the context of Foucauldian scholarship. On the one hand, many attentive readers and commentators have explored the singularities of Foucault’s notion of power, especially in the way it is formulated in the works of the 1970s. On the other, competent and rigorous studies have established the line which goes from the French school of the history of sciences to Foucauldian archaeology. However, surprisingly few scholars have noticed that the presence of Canguilhem is explicit throughout Foucault’s work in the 1970s. It is the very formulation of the Foucauldian idea of a power that operates through norms, a power which is not that of sovereignty, repression and negation, that relies, to a great extent, on a certain way of reading and interpreting Canguilhem. I believe it is possible to say that the reference to Canguilhem underlies Foucault’s formulation of a notion of positive power as well as his discussion of the arts of government and governmentality, which he delineates through a discussion of a power that operates through norms.207 As I will argue, this ‘way of reading’ extrapolates Canguilhem’s studies and methods on the history of science, expanding its concepts and framework to political and social concerns – which, as I will show, presupposes a reading of Canguilhem’s The Normal and the Pathological, and especially his “New Reflexions on the Normal and the Pathological (1963-1966)”. In these texts, not only does Canguilhem offer a theoretical framework in which the norm plays a key role, but he also puts forward a sort of historiographical hypothesis and a sociological analysis which, as we will see, draw on this framework.

This perspective on Canguilhem’s work – emphasising its social and political concern – also shows different points of interaction between the thought of the two philosophers,
which are made explicit by Foucault himself. These points of interaction show that Foucault explores some of the philosophical, sociological and political contents of Canguilhem’s work, which usually escape scholars who base their approach in the assumption of a mere methodological affiliation. Before we discuss these issues, let us consider two examples of Canguilhem’s presence in Foucault’s work and, especially, his role in the formation of a different concept of power.

The first example can be found in the lecture course *Abnormal* (in the 15 January 1975 lecture). Here the reference to Canguilhem appears as providing the founding insight for the ideas of normalising power and of normalisation, concepts which will become central to Foucault’s genealogy. As we will see, this lecture occupies an important place in the lecture course, but also in Foucault’s work as a whole, especially in what concerns the role of Canguilhem for the formulation of some of Foucault’s main insights in the period. This lecture can be read as a sort of report on how a series of problems and reflections are linked to Foucault’s reading (and appropriation) of Canguilhem’s work, especially the “New Reflections on the Normal and the Pathological”. And here I refer, specifically, to ideas that will come to define Foucault’s approach, such as (a) the critique of a negative and repressive model of power and the proposition of a model based on a “positive technology” of “inclusion”; (b) the interaction of medicine and judicial institutions in the formation of an institutional continuum of surveillance of dangerous individuals; (c) the medicalisation of crime and of the criminal (now understood within the framework of pathological abnormality); (d) the development of an “art of governing” which gravitates around the notion of norm. \(^{208}\) Therefore, one could consider this lecture as a sort of theoretical and methodological summary which prepares the grounds for the other lectures. Most importantly, it summarises the main displacements in Foucault’s way of conceiving power.

Additionally, one could perhaps read this 1975 lecture as an exploration of the question Foucault raised in his 1965 letter: how is Canguilhem’s work a sort of condition of possibility of his own? In 1975, Foucault still explores and develops Canguilhem’s insights, clearly situating his reflections on power and government within the theoretical (and historical) framework proposed by Canguilhem. In the final part of the lecture, after having proposed a “positive model” to think power relations, he presents Canguilhem’s “New Reflections” as a source in the task of thinking the norm and normalisation within this “new” model, saying that “in this text on the norm and normalization, there is a set of ideas that

\(^{208}\) These themes are proposed and discussed in the 8 and the 15 January 1975 lectures.
Foucault continues, exploring of Canguilhem’s notion of norm:

The norm is not simply and not even a principle of intelligibility; it is an element on the basis of which a certain exercise of power is founded and legitimised. (...) It is this set of ideas, this simultaneously positive, technical, and political conception of normalisation that I would like to try to put to work historically by applying it to the domain of sexuality.

The passage reveals a complex theoretical relationship with Canguilhem’s work at the core of Foucault’s reflections on power and sexuality, and touches on several of Foucault’s main theoretical and historical concerns of the 1970s (normalisation, disciplinary institutions, correction, sexuality, etc). What I would like to stress is the fact that Foucault reads Canguilhem’s concept of norm politically. In this concept, he seems to find the grounds for his own conception of a power that qualifies and disqualifies, a power that corrects and valorises its objects through a process which Foucault will call normalisation. Moreover, Foucault claims that it is the “positive, technical, and political conception of normalisation” that he finds in Canguilhem which will serve as the tool to undertake the project of a history of sexuality. From this perspective, this whole project also appears as a sort of history of the norm, part of a broader research on what we could call the itineraries of the norm, its experience and applications: in sexuality, one would refer to a series of different levels of relation to norms, since it is situated in the intersection between the living body, the regulation of organic life of the individual and the population but also the norms of social behaviour.

Let us now bracket this discussion, to which we will return later, and mention a second important example of Canguilhem’s presence in Foucault’s work, this time in a major published book, *Discipline and Punish*. The reference to Canguilhem appears in the important chapter on discipline. Curiously, the reference to Canguilhem regarding this point is generally absent from most of the commentaries. This reference is linked to a displacement of the

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209 A, 50.
210 A, 49-50.
211 This dimension of a historical itinerary of the norm and the way it acts upon life and the body persists throughout the different volumes of the project. For example, in UP, from a very different perspective, Foucault continues to investigate sexuality from the perspective of the norm. In this book, he proposes to study sexuality (or the experience of pleasures and the formation of the subject of desire) in relation to “the establishment of a set of rules and norms (...) which found support in religious, judicial, pedagogical an medical institutions; and changes in the way individuals were led to assign meaning and value to their conduct” (UP, 3-4). See also FR, 336.
212 WK, 146-147.
213 Part III.
analysis of power from sovereignty towards discipline and the norm. As Foucault explains, the “power of the Norm appears through the disciplines. (...) The Normal is established as a principle of coercion” in several institutional domains.\footnote{DP, 184.} He adds: “on this topic, one should refer to the important contribution of Canguilhem”.\footnote{DP, 184.}

As we can see here, the reference to Canguilhem – although much more discrete – plays an analogous role to the passage of Abnormal. If Foucault only briefly refers to Canguilhem in the 1975 book when proposing the idea of a “power of the Norm”, in the lecture course one notes the source of this insight and the heuristic path which leads to the conceptualisation of the norm as well as normalising and disciplinary power. This source is precisely Canguilhem’s “New Reflections”, where he specifically delineates this general historical process of standardisation of knowledge, practices and institutions (which Foucault refers to as the “standardisation of teaching”, the “organisation of a national medical profession” and “a medical system” operating with general “norms of health”, as well as the standardisation of industrial processes and products).\footnote{A, 49; SMD, 181.} In Discipline and Punish, however, Foucault goes a step further in relation to Abnormal, and the historical instantiation in which the notion of the norm (and its power) is conceptualised as that of discipline and disciplinary institutions. These concepts will express, in a Foucauldian key, the assimilation of Canguilhem’s sociological reflection (on the historical normalisation and standardisation of knowledges, technique and institutions taking place in the eighteenth century) as well as the conceptual assimilation of the notion of norm as the key to analyse operations of power.

In these examples, one notes the establishment of an analysis of power operations in terms of norms and of the force of norms. Furthermore, these two occurrences point to an articulation of Canguilhem’s role in Foucault’s research that remained active and fruitful, beyond the methodological démarche Foucault mentioned in 1965. In Foucault’s view, Canguilhem diagnosed a certain process in modernity, which starts in the eighteenth century: viz., the process of normalisation. Later, in Society Must be Defended, Foucault suggests that this process expresses itself in many ways: it ranges from scientific methods to grammar, education, the creation of the grandes écoles, unification of units of measure, and the constitution of a normalised science.\footnote{SMD, 181.} Creatively extrapolating Canguilhem’s analysis, Foucault claims that parallel to the normalisation of knowledge, the sciences and measures, a social and political normalisation also takes place. More precisely, what takes place is a
normalisation of living bodies. According to Foucault, there emerges a certain management of life, living bodies and living individuals in relation to a certain set of norms.  

2.1. “An Invisible College”: Canguilhem and the Definition of an Intellectual Field

Another insight regarding the way in which Foucault’s work is related to Canguilhem can be found in “Life: Experience and Science”. As I mentioned above, I believe this text can be read in relation to Foucault’s 1965 letter and the problems it opens. From this perspective, it could be considered an attempt to, as he said in 1965, “come to grips” with the relation between his work and Canguilhem’s.

I believe that “Life: Experience and Science” answers question posed in 1965 in two different ways. First, it attributes to Canguilhem’s work the role of a historical grounding of the theoretical enterprises that immediately preceded and “followed the movement of 1968”; second, as Agamben stresses, Foucault’s analysis finds in Canguilhem, an alternative way to think subjectivity (different from phenomenology and what he called the “philosophy of the subject”) as rooted in the “errors of life”.

Let us begin with the first idea. Proposing a sort of “sociology of the French intellectual field”, Foucault situates Canguilhem in relation to an epistemological map characterising French philosophy in the twentieth century. In Foucault’s view, Canguilhem’s work constitutes a key to read the history of contemporary French philosophy, since “nearly all” philosophers who played an important role in the political and scientific debates of the 1960s “were affected, directly or indirectly by the work of Canguilhem”. As Foucault puts it:

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218 To A and DP, one could add the 1963 reference to Canguilhem’s CV in BC, in the discussion of Bichat’s vitalism (BC, 177). In this book, however, one finds another strand that appears connect to Canguilhem in the 1970s: an analysis of the normalisation of medical knowledge (BC, 30) and teaching, an institutional regulation of medical practice, but also the formation of a “medicine of normality” (BC, 40-41), concerned with the maintenance and care for the norm in the individual, but also – and surprisingly – with the maintenance of social normality and ‘good government’. In a clear prefiguration of Foucault’s reflections on pastoral power, in BC doctors appear as “priests of the body”, dedicated to the care of the “collective life of the nation” and “individual existence” playing a distinctively political role (BC 36-38). It is important to note that Canguilhem acknowledges that some of his insights and reflections and in the addendum to NP come from his reading of Foucault (NP, 285).

219 EW2, 466.

220 EW2, 466.

221 Agamben, Potentialities, 221; EW2, 477.

222 EW2, 465.

223 EW2, 465.
But, take away Canguilhem, and you will no longer understand very much about a whole series of discussions that took place among French Marxists; nor will you grasp what is specific about sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Robert Castel, Jean-Claude Passeron, what makes them so distinctive in the field of sociology; you will miss a whole aspect of the theoretical work done by psychoanalysis and, in particular, by the Lacanians. Furthermore, in the whole debate of ideas that preceded or followed the movement of 1968, it is easy to find the place of those who were shaped in one way or another by Canguilhem.  

I believe it is clear that, in presenting the epistemological and sociological importance of Canguilhem’s work for the formation of the philosophical field of the 1960s and 1970s, Foucault is also presenting a commentary on the historical and intellectual grounds of his own work. Through this historical detour, Foucault concretely develops the main idea of the 1965 letter, according to which his own work finds in Canguilhem’s a sort of condition of possibility. In 1978 he explains that this is not due to an individual influence, but rather to the role Canguilhem (and the French tradition which he will call the “philosophy of the concept”) played in creating or configuring an epistemological space that made a series of theoretical moves possible.

However, if Canguilhem’s work is this historical and epistemological landmark, it is in its turn situated in a broader historical context, characterised by a dividing line, separating a “philosophy of experience, of meaning, of the subject and a philosophy of knowledge, of rationality and of the concept”. The former, finds its expression in the works of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty; the latter in those of Koyré, Bachelard, Cavaillès and Canguilhem. As Foucault explains, it was in the context of this opposition – well established in the twentieth century – that “phenomenology was admitted into France”. The example he mentions is Husserl’s 1929 *Cartesian Meditations*, which was the contested object of two possible readings. One sought to “radicalise Husserl in the direction of a philosophy of the subject” (which according to Foucault is expressed in Sartre’s 1935 text on the “Transcendence of the Ego”); the other, represented by Cavaillès (*Méthode Axiomatique; La Formation de la théorie des ensembles*), sought to “go back to the founding problems of Husserl’s thought”, such as “formalism and intutionalism”. At first sight, the second one remained theoretical and

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224 EW2, 466.
225 EW2, 466.
226 According to Foucault this opposition could be referred back to the nineteenth century, to the opposition of the works of Bergson and Poincaré, Lachelier and Couturat, Maine de Biran and Comte (EW2, 466). One should note, however, the importance Canguilhem attributed to Merleau-Ponty’s work – as well as the proximity he saw between their works (NP, 29; 294).
227 EW2, 466.
228 EW2, 466.
speculative, removed from ethical and political enquiries. However, Foucault notes, its representatives participated, actively and directly, in the combat during the Second World War. As we will see, Canguilhem himself was a résistant. But the reference here is clearly to Jean Cavaillès, who died fighting in the resistance against Nazism.\(^{229}\) Cavaillès would become, for Canguilhem and Foucault – a symbol of both philosophical and theoretical rigour (of the philosophy of knowledge and the concept Foucault refers to) and of militant political and ethical activity. As Canguilhem writes:

Cavaillès, who called himself a Spinozist and did not believe in history in the existential sense, refuted in advance – by the action he felt himself impelled to undertake, by his participation in the history that he lived out tragically until his death – the argument of those who seek to discredit what they call structuralism by condemning it to generate, among other misdeeds, passivity in the face of reality.\(^ {230}\)

In Foucault’s narrative, this “philosophy of the concept” was also important in the political events of the 1960s. Considering its theoretical and formal concerns, Foucault adds, it might sound surprising that this line of thinkers is so deeply involved in the present. For Foucault the reason for this is that, as Cavaillès’ example shows, for this philosophy of the concept, “the question of the basis of rationality” cannot “be dissociated from an interrogation concerning its current conditions of existence”.\(^ {231}\) Rational thought, in this tradition, cannot be separated from its concrete and historical conditions of exercise (and one recognises here a version of the critical theme that is of capital importance in Foucault’s work).\(^ {232}\) In this sense, Foucault tells us, the philosophy of the concept assimilates a concern with the present that characterised the Enlightenment: “in France, it is the history of science in particular that has served as a medium for the philosophical question of historical Aufkärung”.\(^ {233}\) Not only does it investigate the basis, powers and rights of rational thought; it also interrogates its conditions of existence. In a word, it asks “questions that must be addressed to a rationality that aspires to the universal while developing within contingency”.\(^ {234}\)

\(^ {229}\) Foucault will mention this fact in other texts. See, for instance, FR, 374.
\(^ {231}\) EW2, 467.
\(^ {232}\) According to this version, the conditions of possibility of knowledge and intelligibility cannot be dissociated of the concrete practices which function as enabling conditions for knowledge and intelligibility. Not only is critique here defined as the enquiry on the rights, reach and legitimate domain of reason; but also as an investigation on conditions of possibility that are understood historically, linked to historical and contingent practices.
\(^ {233}\) EW2, 468. See also the interview “Structuralism an Post-structuralism”, EW2 440.
\(^ {234}\) EW2, 469.
If the tradition of the philosophy of the concept and its expression in the history of science, rooted in the tradition of the Aufklärung, served as an enabling condition for a series of philosophical positions in the 1960s, one might ask in which way it did this. And this leads us to the second way in which, I believe, the 1978 text could be read as an attempt of answering the 1965 questions.

In “Life: Experience and Science”, Foucault suggests that the philosophy of the concept proposed an alternative way to think subjectivity, different from phenomenology and a philosophy of the Cogito which saw in the subject a founding structure, source of all meaning and act of knowledge (or, as Foucault calls it, “a philosophy of meaning, of the subject and of lived experience”). He writes: “One understands why Georges Canguilhem’s thought, his work as a historian and philosopher, has had such a decisive importance in France for all those who, from very different points of view, have tried to rethink the question of the subject”.  

Now, if one considers Foucault’s 1982 statement in “The Subject and Power” according to which his main object of analysis was the subject – a “history of the different modes in which (...) human beings are made subjects” – then the way he perceives the link of his work to Canguilhem’s becomes clear. In Canguilhem, Foucault and a whole generation of French philosophers found tools to be employed in the attempt to think the subject without a “philosophy of the subject”.

For Foucault, Canguilhem makes a new way to think subjectivity possible precisely through his concept of life. In Foucault’s account, developing the encounter between the life sciences, a reflection of the “situation of the concept in life” and the conceptual framework of “information theory”, Canguilhem proposes a notion of life as error,  

235 EW2, 477.  
236 EW2, 477.  
237 “I would like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years. It has not been to analyse the phenomena of power, nor elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (EW3, 326).  
238 EW2, 475. We will return to this issue in Part II. However, it is important to highlight here that Foucault sees, in his interpretation of Canguilhem, knowledge and the concept as rooted in life’s activity in the world, and not in opposition to it. The concept is a strategy of life to respond to the challenges of the environment while at the same time constitute this very environment. As Foucault explains: “the concept insofar as it is one of the modes of that information which every living being takes from its environment and by which conversely it structures its environment”. He adds that forming concepts is “a way to live in a relative mobility”, linked to a human innovation in the realm of living, a “special type of information”, which in its turn presupposes “error” (EW2, 475-476).
understood as the capacity to “err”, to be wrong, to fail in the process of information which defines its relationship to the environment. As Foucault spells out:

For, at the most basic level of life, the processes of coding and decoding give way to a chance occurrence that, before becoming a disease, a deficiency, or a monstrosity, is something like a disturbance in the informative system, something like a “mistake”. In this sense life – and this is its radical feature – is that which is capable of error.239

Foucault explains that “although phenomenology brought the body, sexuality, death and the perceived world into the field of analysis, the cogito remained central to it; neither the rationality of science nor the specificity of the life sciences compromise its founding role”.240 Canguilhem’s “philosophy of error” and the notion of life as error, Foucault believes, “oblige us to pose the question in a different way”: “Should not the whole theory of the subject be reformulated, seeing that knowledge, rather than opening onto the truth of the world, is deeply rooted in the ‘errors’ of life?”241

Surprisingly, 1978 Foucault situates Canguilhem’s impact not from the perspective of the methodological contribution of historical epistemology, but rather from the perspective of an insight on a different way to think the problem of subjectivity within life, and as the contingent responses of life to the challenges of the environment. Subjectivity then appears not as a founding Cogito, but as one of the contingent solutions that life produces in the process of information it entertains with the world. In this insight, which Foucault only sketched,242 he sees the alternative to a philosophy which defined the subject as the founding structure of knowledge and the source of meaning. What I would like to stress here is that Canguilhem’s impact in the intellectual field of the 1960s is not described through the usual reference to the methodological contribution of historical epistemology. Rather, it is described through an insight regarding a critique of the philosophy of the subject and a new way to think subjectivity. This leads us to a reassessment of the ways in which the

239 EW2, 476.
240 EW2, 477.
241 EW2, 477.
242 I believe that the precise ways in which subjectivity could be interpreted within the framework of the errors of life remain unclear in Foucault’s text. However, he relates the problem of error to the issue of truth, claiming that the distinction of ‘true’ and ‘false’ are a way to conceptualise life’s possibility to ‘be wrong’, to be ‘mistaken’, and probably of life as research of forms. In this sense, he claims that Descartes (the “Cartesian break”) raised the question of the relations between subject and truth, while Canguilhem reflects on the relation between life and truth (EW2, 476-477). Perhaps one of the ways to interpret this enigmatic statement could be the following. Subjectivity is not that given structure the opens for the knowledge of the world and of life (as the definition of the “Cartesian moment” in HS would have us believe), it is rather a product or a process rooted in the errors of life, that is in the history of life’s debate with the environment.
relation between Foucault and Canguilhem has been developed in scholarship. I now turn to one of the main interpretations of this relation, pointing to some of its problems.

2.2. Beyond the History of Science and Historical Epistemology

The predominant ways to connect Foucault’s work to Canguilhem have been built through a historical reflection concerning the formation of the archaeological method and its relations to the intellectual context from which it emerges. One of the main works developing this line of research in the Anglophone scholarship is Garry Gutting’s *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, where he proposes to open a “new perspective” by situating “Foucault’s thought in the context of recent French history and philosophy of science”, aiming at understanding Foucault as a “historian and philosopher of science, balancing and complementing the current standard construal of him as a social critic and theorist”.243 One of Gutting’s main theses in this book concerns the status of archaeology and its place within French epistemology. He explains:

[A]rchaeology is not an isolated method reflecting Foucault’s idiosyncratic approach to the history of thought. Rather, it is rooted in the French tradition of history and philosophy of science and is specifically developed in the context of Gaston Bachelard’s philosophy of science through an extension and transformation of Georges Canguilhem’s history of science.244

Gutting effectively emphasises the particularities of Foucault’s method as well as its relations to the concern of writing a critical history of reason through its regional and local applications – a feature the author relates to the Bachelardian idea according to which “reason is best known by reflection on science and science is best known by reflection on its history”.245 He also stresses that Foucault was not interested “in the history of thought for its own sake”, and that his concern with the history of science, rationality and knowledge “was guided by” a critical “philosophical ethos deriving from the Enlightenment values of human liberation and autonomous human thought as an instrument of that liberation”.246

244 Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, x.
246 Gutting, here, bases his analysis on Foucault’s formulation of what he understands as the “critical attitude” in his reading of Kant’s text “What is Enlightenment?”. Gutting also stresses the difference between Foucault’s interpretation of the critical project (especially with regards to the first Critique or, at least, certain way to read it). For Gutting, Foucault “is not concerned with determining the a priori necessary conditions governing the exercise of reason but with the reflection on what seem to be such conditions to reveal the extent to which they in fact have a contingent historical origin”
In Gutting’s reconstruction, then, we find Foucault’s archaeological method reconnected to a tradition that was of fundamental importance for its development. Through a reference to two key textual places – “Life: Experience and Science”, and the interview on “Structuralism and Post-Structuralism” – Gutting insists that “Foucault himself emphasised the importance of Bachelard and Canguilhem not only for French thought in general but also for his own theoretical orientation”. In Gutting’s reading, it is “in a history of science that is strongly influenced by Canguilhem” that Foucault found the elements to react to the dominant intellectual movements of his time (such as “Marxist, Freudian and structuralist thought”). It is possible to note, then, that Gutting’s approach, concerned with opening “up a fresh (...) and fruitful way of understanding Foucault”, situates the work of the latter in its context of emergence and in relation to its main “influences”. Moreover, one also notes Gutting’s emphasis on an epistemological dimension of Foucault’s thought (since he invites us to read his work as that of a “historian and philosopher of science”), which would be expressed in the archaeological approach to science and the history of knowledge. This is the general framework in which Gutting relates Foucault and Canguilhem. Gutting’s claim is that “Canguilhem, especially through his ‘history of concepts’ and his concern with the status of norms in science and in history, was the most immediate influence on Foucault’s historical work”.

I would like to highlight Gutting’s use of the term “influence”. The term appears throughout his analysis in claims such as the following: “Positively, Foucault’s work in the history of science is strongly influenced by Canguilhem’s history of concepts”. And he adds that, this was not a passive influence, but one that Foucault extended critically and creatively: “even where the influence of Bachelard and Canguilhem is particularly strong, Foucault extends, adapts and transforms their ideas and methods”. In my view, Gutting’s emphasis on the notion of “influence” is a significant fact, and points to a limitation of his

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(Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason, 3). This project of the exploration of contingencies is related, in Gutting’s view, to finding spaces of “possible transgression”.

247 DE2, text 330; EW2, 433-458.

248 Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason, 9.

249 Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason, x.

250 Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason, 12.

251 It is apparent, then, that Foucault himself situates his work within the tradition of French history and philosophy of science from Comte to Bachelard and Canguilhem” (Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason, 11).

252 Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason, 12.

253 Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason, 53.

254 Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason, 54.
approach, especially because he thinks it is possible to find the evidence of this “influence” in two facts: [1] that “Canguilhem was one of [Foucault’s] teachers at the École Normale Supérieure” and also [2] “the director of his doctoral thesis”. The author presents these “facts” as ways to justify that which was an important contribution of his own work, namely the focus on importance of Bachelard and Canguilhem for the formation of Foucault’s thought.

I believe that there are two problems with this approach. First, and beginning with the methodological operation, one must acknowledge that it makes a legitimate claim in intellectual history, associating Foucault with the French tradition of historical epistemology. This association finds its textual ground in Foucault’s writings and interviews. Whereas Machado builds a general comparative frame, presenting the proximity between Foucault’s research and French epistemology only to better show the differences between them and the singularity of archaeology, Gutting develops the commonality between Foucault and the Bachelard-Canguilhem line of research. He shows that “in many important respects,

255 Another limitation would be related to his own methodological position in relation to the Bachelard-Canguilhem-Foucault network: if this “network” proposes a history of thought which is critical of unconscious associations and cognitive habits and, especially, which is critical to the “superficial pursuits of ‘precursors’” (Idem, 54), why would then he propose to build a history of Foucault’s method by revealing “precursors” and “influences”? Either Gutting’s proposition is not engaged with the methods he is analysing, which is to say he is not committed in his own work to the sort of methodological stance for the history of thought that can be extracted from Bachelard-Canguilhem-Foucault, or his argument fails to apply the methodological principles he elucidates and is then inconsistent. It is interesting to note that Machado, who wrote before Gutting, avoided this path, criticising precisely the notion of ‘influence’ and the mythical celebration of ‘precursors’. In the introduction to his book: “This study does not aim to be an analysis of ‘influences’: it does not aim to explain an author using other authors, predecessors or contemporaries, to stress originality or celebrate precursors”.

256 Gutting, Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason, 53-54.

257 I have already mentioned the 1965 letter, which frames the issue especially through the epistemological point of view. See also DE1, 723; 1250. In a 1980 he specifies: “Je n’ai pas été directement l’élève de Bachelard, mais j’ai lu ses livres; dans ses réflexions sur la discontinuité dans l’histoire des sciences et dans l’idée d’un travail de la raison sur elle-même (...) il y avait toute une série d’éléments dont (...) j’ai repris” (DE2, 875). Foucault was also a reader of the Bachelard “nocturne” as his text on Binswanger attests (DE1, 142).

258 “Whereas epistemology (...) postulates that science orders [ordonne] philosophy [i.e. that science has priority over philosophy], as Bachelard says, archaeology, reclaiming its independence with regards to all science, presents itself as a critique of the very idea of rationality; whereas epistemological history, situated at the level of scientific concepts, investigates the production of truth in science, which it considers as a process that defines and perfects rationality, archaeological history (...) does not privilege the normative issue of truth, nor does it establish a temporal order taking the current form of rationality as its reference” (Machado, Ciência e saber, 11). Machado adds that one of the main differences between archaeology and epistemology concerns the particularity of the objects that the former studies: whereas epistemology studies sciences – such as physics or chemistry in Bachelard’s case – archaeology extends its field of enquiry to forms of knowledge and perception that are not necessarily scientific and that are situated at the level of knowledge [savoirs].
Foucault’s view of science is Bachelardian, claiming that he subscribes to “the essential historicity of scientific conceptions as well as the understanding of this historicity in terms of a discontinuous series of breaks”. Gutting also points to the affinity that exists between Foucault’s critical project of showing the “contingent nature” of alleged necessary a priori limits on knowledge corresponds and “Bachelard’s insistence that philosophical a priori derive from our inability or unwillingness to think beyond the categories of current (or recently past) science”. Furthermore, he explains, Foucault’s attempt at an archaeological uncovering of the “deep structures” – or the unconscious – of knowledge resonates with Bachelard’s idea of a “psychoanalysis” of knowledge. According to Gutting, however, Foucault also disagrees with Bachelard on several points, and his disagreement “mirrors” Canguilhem’s position. For example, Gutting argues, “he follows Canguilhem in emphasising the various ways that continuities can persist across epistemological breaks”. He likewise rejects “Bachelard's entirely negative construal of ‘unconscious’ factors in scientific thought as epistemological obstacles”.

However, although pointing to these analogies, this approach seems to lack a detailed and systematic treatment of the Foucault-Canguilhem connection, especially beyond the investigation on the history of science. Most importantly, Gutting seems to fail to account for the claim upon which his approach rests – “Foucault’s work in the history of science is strongly influenced by Canguilhem’s history of concepts”. When he attempts to ground this ‘influence hypothesis’ in terms of historical evidence, he resorts only to two biographical facts which loosely connect the two authors. This results in a sort of assumption of an “influence”, which nevertheless can only be effectively explained by

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259 Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, 52.
260 Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, 52. See DE2, 875.
261 Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, 53.
262 In the Foreword to the English edition of the *Order of Things*, Foucault writes: “I did not operate, therefore, at the level that is usually that of the historian of science (...). For, on the one hand, the history of science traces the progress of discovery, the formulation of problems, and the clash of controversy; it also analyses theories in their internal economy; in short, it describes the processes and products of the scientific consciousness. But, on the other hand, it tries to restore what eluded that consciousness: the influences that affected it, the implicit philosophies that were subjacent to it, the unformulated thematics, the unseen obstacles; it describes the unconscious of science. This unconscious is always the negative side of science – that which resists it, deflects it, or disturbs it. What I would like to do, however, is to reveal a positive unconscious of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse...” (OT, xi).
263 Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, 53.
264 Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, 53.
265 Gutting, *Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, 54.
266 “This [influence] is not surprising, since Canguilhem was not only one of his teachers at the École Normale Superieure but also the director of his doctoral thesis” (*Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason*, 54).
analogies and affinities between the texts by Foucault and Canguilhem. On the one hand, the exploration of these analogies and commonalities could be a legitimate philosophical and hermeneutical procedure. Indeed, it has no doubt been fundamental for the opening of a research field in Anglophone scholarship. But, on the other hand, can it really (or still) inform us about the ways in which one author read the other, or the ways in which one ‘influenced’ the other? Is Gutting’s hermeneutical effort simply presupposing an “influence”?

As Alison Ross recently pointed out:

Whereas Foucault saw in the nebulous category of “influence”, or the idea of significant precursors, pliable mechanisms for establishing connections where none necessarily exist, these types of syntheses are often the mechanisms used to establish the case for Foucault’s affiliations with [French] rationalist figures. This is notably the case even in scholarship which aims to set out the rationale behind Foucault’s methodological scruples.267

In addition to the foreign character of the notion of influence with regards to Foucault’s historical framework (which, according to Ross, is something he shares Bachelard and Canguilhem), it seems possible to pose a more historiographical question. Is the effective commonality of themes and attitudes in the plane of method necessarily the sign of an influence which can be traced back to an affiliation reflected in the facts that “Canguilhem was Foucault’s teacher at the ENS” and that “Canguilhem was Foucault’s thesis director”? I believe this sort of biographical background has become a tacit assumption in scholarship (Bachelard’s and Canguilhem’s influence on Foucault’s work from the perspective of the epistemological foundations of his method and theoretical affiliation), and has probably become a sort of ‘obstacle’ to the development of a more rigorous, documented and historically grounded reconstruction of the relations between Foucault and Canguilhem.268 Additionally, it is also an obstacle in terms of building bridges between the

267 Ross, “The Errors of History: Knowledge and Epistemology in Bachelard, Canguilhem and Foucault”, Angelaki, 2018, 145. Ross is sceptical about Foucault’s relation to what she calls ‘rationalism’. If Gutting’s approach tends to presuppose an ‘influence’ without going into detail on the Foucault-Canguilhem relationship, I believe that Ross probably goes too far in the opposite direction, separating Foucault’s work from a tradition that was important for the formation of his work. This is not the topic of my current investigation, but I would like to point to the necessity of new research on the relation between Foucault and the history of science from a more historically documented perspective.

268 Facing the same “obstacle”, Alison Ross puts forward a much stronger claim according to which “not [only] the idea of influence is weak and requires qualification, but that his [Foucault’s] approach to knowledge is fundamentally irreconcilable with the approach to epistemology in Bachelard and Canguilhem” (“The Errors of History”, 144). For Ross, not only did Foucault’s “skepticism” concern social norms, values and institutions, but also knowledge itself, not to mention its effects. In this sense, in her reading, “despite some general points of connection, in no respect does” the association for
two authors, since a considerable part of the work (which consists precisely in connecting them) is seen as a presupposition or a given.

To face this problem, we must, first of all, reveal the historical inaccuracy of these ‘facts’ (Foucault as Canguilhem’s ‘faithful’ student and supervisee). In order to do that, I suggest that we re-read Foucault’s 1965 letter to Canguilhem, where he says: “When I began to work, ten years ago, I did not know you – not your books”. This suggests that things are probably more complex than suggested by the “influence” hypothesis: while at the same time stating his debt to Canguilhem, Foucault claims that he did not know his work when he began his own research. 269 Most importantly, this testimony challenges the idea that Foucault had a close relationship to Canguilhem during his formative years at the ENS.270 It is from the Birth of the Clinic onwards that he situates his work within the epistemological field inaugurated by Canguilhem.

Indeed, if we turn to Foucault’s intellectual biography, we note that his initial encounters with Canguilhem were difficult institutional ‘rites of passage’. He met Canguilhem at three milestones of his academic path: the admission exam to the ENS in 1946, 271 the agrégation and, finally, his thesis defence. In the first two encounters,

Foucault’s work to “the epistemological history of Bachelard and Canguilhem (...) stand as an adequate description of Foucault’s various projects or the discernible temperament and approach that underpins his intellectual position” (“The Errors of History”, 151).

269 Indeed, in 1955, when Canguilhem replaced Bachelard at the Sorbonne, Foucault left France for Sweden where he worked at the Maison de France while writing most of his doctoral thesis, Folie et déraison. That is to say that most of the thesis was written when Foucault was not in Paris. Most of the documents he used in his research was found in the Swedish library Carolina Rediviva, and Foucault even considered defending the thesis in Sweden, where he looked for a “supervisor” or someone who would sponsor its defence in the Swedish university. The Swedish Professor Lindroth read Foucault’s drafts and refused to support his project (Cf. Eribon, Michel Foucault; Macey, The Lives of Michel Foucault).

270 On the contrary, as Eribon shows, Foucault would have a bad souvenir of Canguilhem in the two occasions when he met him in his formative and ENS years: the admission exam and the agrégation exam. In the two occasions Canguilhem was part of the assessing panel (Eribon, Michel Foucault, 46). In the agrégation, Foucault was especially annoyed by the choice of the topic for the oral exam: “Foucault was outraged; in his considered opinion, sexuality was not a suitable theme for the agrégation. It had been proposed by Canguilhem, despite protests from Davy, on the grounds that the agrég topics had not changed since he took his oral in 1927 and that it was time for something new (...). Foucault shared Davy’s more conservative view and formally protested to Canguilhem” (Macey, The Lives of Michel Foucault, 45). According to Macey, although Foucault later considered Canguilhem as one of his masters, he was “not actually taught by Canguilhem” (The Lives of Michel Foucault, 22).

271 Eribon offers an interesting account of that moment: “Paul-Michel Foucault est admissible. Il peut donc se présenter, un beau jour de juillet 1946, devant les deux examinateurs qui font passer l’oral de philosophie, dans la salle des Actes, au premier étage de la rue d’Ulm: Pierre-Maxime Schuhl, professeur à la faculté des lettres de Toulouse, et Georges Canguilhem, figure éminente de la philosophie universitaire française, qui enseigne (...) à la faculté des lettres de Strasbourg” (Eribon, Michel Foucault, 46).
Canguilhem was not teaching in Paris. By the time Foucault begins his studies at the ENS, Canguilhem was *inspecteur général de l'éducation nationale*, a role he exercised after teaching in different lycées and at the University of Strasbourg, and before taking up Bachelard’s place at the Sorbonne in 1955, when Foucault leaves France for Sweden. Thus, as a matter of fact, Canguilhem was not Foucault’s teacher at the ENS nor at the Sorbonne. Finally, it is not accurate to say that Canguilhem’s influence is due to the fact that he was Foucault’s “supervisor”.

According to Eribon, before returning to France, Foucault began to look for a “patron” for his thesis, someone who could officially play the role of supervisor (“*directeur de recherches*”) or, at least, of a “rapporteur” and sponsor the candidate during his thesis defence, since both Foucault’s major thesis on madness and his secondary thesis on Kant were already finished. On the occasion of a short visit to Paris, Foucault first contacts his former *khâgne* teacher, Jean Hyppolite. The latter accepts to support Foucault’s defence of the *thèse complémentaire* on Kant’s *Anthropology*. However, after reading the manuscript of *Folie et déraison* in December 1957, he directs Foucault to a professor of the history of sciences at the Sorbonne who would perhaps be a more appropriate sponsor of his main thesis: Georges Canguilhem. Indeed, according to Elden, Canguilhem accepts being the “sponsor” of Foucault’s thesis in 1961 – “supervisor would be too strong a word, as Canguilhem himself makes clear”. As Elden, explains, “despite Foucault’s fulsome acknowledgement in the published version, Canguilhem denies that his comments on it made any difference to its final form”. Daniel Defert, in his “*Chronologie*” writes that in December 1958 Canguilhem reads a now thick manuscript of *Folie et déraison* and says: “Don’t change anything. It’s a thesis”. As we can note, then, the two historical facts mobilised to justify the assumption of “influence” (that Foucault was Canguilhem’s student and supervisee, and that he would have assimilated the master’s approach during this

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272 See Roundinesco, “Introduction”, in Bing, Braunstein and Roudinesco (ed.) *Actualité de Georges Canguilhem*, Paris: Sythélabo, 1998, 36. In his book, Gutting does not provide any evidence for the claim that Foucault was “Canguilhem’s student” (such as course notes, institutional documents, academic records, etc.). Additionally, Gutting also assumes that Canguilhem taught at the ENS, without giving any reference.


274 Defert, “*Chronologie*” in Foucault’s DE1, 26.

275 Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, 175; Defert in DE1, 26.


277 Elden claims this information can be found on an interview with Canguilhem by Eribon and clarified in a letter from the latter to former (8 March 1988, CAPHÉS GC 33.7.7). I thank Stuart Elden for this reference as well as for sharing an excerpt of his book regarding this issue and permission to quote.

278 Defert, “*Chronologie*” (DE1, 27). See also Elden, *Canguilhem*, 8-9.
formative years at the ENS and the writing of his doctoral thesis in the late 1950s) project what they intend to explain and are falsified by a more attentive reconstruction of Foucault’s intellectual trajectory.

From a more theoretical perspective, Ross criticised the immediate association of Foucault to French historical epistemology, which she designates as “French rationalism”. According to Ross,

The claim that a degree of influence can be detected in the cautious and provisional tone with which Foucault and Canguilhem approach their work on conceptual history is also not strong enough to support either the claim of ‘influence’ or the reference made in some of the literature to a ‘shared project’. 279

My main point here, however, is not to discredit the interpretations which emphasised the connection of Foucault’s work to the French tradition of historical epistemology, nor to refute the thesis according to which Canguilhem’s (and Bachelard’s) work had an impact in the formation of Foucault’s method. The point is, rather, to show how this sort of reading somehow became a galvanised point in the discussion of the relations between Canguilhem and Foucault, and in some cases ends up perpetuating certain incorrect historical assumptions. My approach converges with Ross’ to the extent that it stresses the insufficient epistemological and historical reach of the notion of “influence” as well as its inadequacy and inconsistency with the historical approaches and methods mobilised by Bachelard, Canguilhem and Foucault. On the other hand, I believe that the importance of the engagement of the works of Bachelard and Canguilhem cannot be neglected when investigating the formation of Foucault’s method. More important than the examination of affiliations is perhaps the investigation of intellectual exchanges.

In 1997, in his introduction to a series of texts reflecting the dialogue between the Foucault and Canguilhem gathered in *Foucault and his Interlocutors*, Arnold Davidson pointed to a more complex way to relate the two philosophers. Beyond this “nebulous idea of influence”, Davidson stresses the “remarkable intellectual fruitfulness of the exchanges between the two authors”. 280 In this sense, Davidson departs from the approach that usually goes from Canguilhem to Foucault, following a chronological line and shows how the latter read the former. Davidson’s emphasis is rather on a dialogue, an interlocution, and his focus is on a series of ways in which Canguilhem reads Foucault. Here, one finds the elements to

279 Ross, “The Errors of History”, 144.
think of Canguilhem as an attentive reader of Foucault’s work rather than its supervisor or precursor.

In her text “Georges Canguilhem, la médecine à la résistance”, Roudinesco also emphasises this exchange, showing that Canguilhem only introduced significant modifications to his book on the *Normal and the Pathological* in the 1966, after having read Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic*. Departing from the chronological narrative, Roudinesco proposes to read the Foucault-Canguilhem exchange from the perspective of a shift in roles or positions: “Car il est rare d’assister à une telle inversion de filiations, où un maître remanie sa théorie à la lumière de l’œuvre de celui qui a choisi de devenir son élève”. If, on the one hand, one could be more cautious than Roudinesco in stating a shift, an inversion of affiliations, one can clearly maintain, on the same textual bases, that the relationship between the two philosophers goes both ways.

In the report of Foucault’s thesis, for example, one can find evidence of this approach by Canguilhem, who as a reader and commentator, situates the importance of Foucault’s *History of Madness* and is able to explain its originality. In 1991, Canguilhem writes that “1961 [with the publication of *Histoire de la folie*] remains and will remain the year that a truly great philosopher was discovered”. In his readings, Canguilhem is sensitive to the specify of Foucault’s approaches and provides insightful interpretations of his work. I believe, then, that by following Davidson’s suggestion and reading Canguilhem’s texts on Foucault, we find an alternative – and much more fruitful way – to study the relations between the two authors.

Finally, challenging the accuracy of the historical information that would provide reasons for the ‘influence hypothesis’, I suggest that we approach this relation from a

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282 Roudinesco sees in the BC a challenge Foucault poses to Canguilhem and his vitalism: “À la conception canguilhémienne d’une norme produite par la vie, Foucault substituait donc l’idée d’une norme construite par l’ordre social et porteuse de normalisation. Autrement dit, il opposait une normativité sociale à une normativité biologique, une archéologie à une phénoménologie” (“Georges Canguilhem, de la médecine à la Résistance”, 39). It is interesting to note, following this remark, that Canguilhem’s specific approach to social norms, normativity and normalisation will be presented in the 1966 addendum to his medicine thesis, where he indeed quotes the *Birth of the Clinic*.


284 Canguilhem, “Report from Mr. Canguilhem on the Manuscript Filed by Mr. Michel Foucault, Director of the Institut Français of Hamburg, in Order to Obtain Permission to Print His Principal Thesis for the Doctor of Letters”, in Davidson, *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, 35.

285 We will return to these readings in the following chapters.
different perspective. Instead of trying to build a new historical account of the indeed existing relation of Foucault to the history of science and historical epistemology, my thesis proposes a different operation. This operation is, on the one hand, aware of its philosophical character and stance and, on the other, historically attentive, reading the sources we now have available, without assuming the evidence of an ‘influence’.

My intervention consists in reading Canguilhem’s work and using it as a possible viewpoint to re-read Foucault’s work, without trying to build a historical narrative that goes from Canguilhem to Foucault. In order to set the elements for effecting this task, my proposition is simple: that we bracket the discussion on the origins of Foucault’s method as well as a diachronic reading of possible ‘influences’ in the formation of his archaeology, and that we turn our attention to Canguilhem’s work, especially his medicine thesis, situating it in the context in which it emerges in Canguilhem’s own philosophical trajectory. What I propose is not the search for a precursor, but rather a search for philosophical tools to be employed in our reading of Foucault. However, in order to do that, we first need to read Canguilhem’s thought and understand its main lines.

Canguilhem was one of the most important epistemologists and historians of science of his generation. Not only Foucault, but also Althusser, Badiou, Bourdieu, Macherey and other thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s have attributed to Canguilhem’s thought a centrality in the intellectual debate of that period. Canguilhem’s epistemology, according to these authors, operated an important transformation in French philosophy. As we have seen, both in Gutting’s analysis and in our own presentation of “Life: Experience and Science”, Foucault finds in Canguilhem’s work the key to understand the epistemological grounds of the intellectual and philosophical field of his time, developing a cartography of this field in the terms of the problems Canguilhem confronted. We have also seen how Foucault describes Canguilhem’s work as a well delimited enterprise belonging to the history of sciences, which also functioned as “a hotbed for philosophical elaboration”.

287 As Badiou writes, “Georges Canguilhem was – and therefore still is (...) – the strong and discreet master of my philosophical generation”, and claims that “his conception of intellectual rigour extended, on the one hand, to a minutely detailed account of the history of concepts and, on the other, to a pure logic of commitment” (*Pocket Pantheon*, London: Verso, 2009, 5-6).
288 Bourdieu refers to Canguilhem as a maître à penser, a totemic emblem, and a lighthouse for all those who sought to think intellectual life differently and to “break with the dominant model and who constituted themselves as an ‘invisible college’ by rallying around his name” (*Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 11).
290 EW2, 469.
Nevertheless, it is usually through the lens of the French tradition of historical epistemology, in a line of continuity with the work of Bachelard, whom Canguilhem succeeded that the thought of the author of the *Normal and the Pathological* is understood.

However, in the history of Canguilhem’s thought, philosophy chronologically precedes both his medical education and his research in the history of science. In the next chapter I will show that it is as a philosopher that Canguilhem begins his studies of medicine – precisely to bring philosophical reflection close to “matters foreign to it” and to “concrete human problems”, as he claims in the introduction of his medicine thesis.291 And it is during the Second World War, already in possession of a philosophy degree and teaching philosophy, that he finishes his medical studies, while at the same time being active in the Résistance.292 If we situate, then, Canguilhem’s work on medicine, epistemology and the history of science in the context of his broader intellectual development, in which philosophy plays a key role, we can see a much more complete, and also more complex picture of this author. Canguilhem will then appear as a politically minded philosopher of the norm and normativity.

291 NP, 33 (French edition, 7-8).
Chapter 3

Canguilhem, Philosopher

In this chapter, my attempt will be to trace Canguilhem’s philosophical trajectory, showing the intellectual and practical concerns that guided him through his medical education. I will emphasise Canguilhem’s relation to Alain and a certain French reception of Kant, on the one hand, and his political engagement and antifascism, on the other. My intention is to set the grounds for a reading of the *Normal and the Pathological* beyond the history of science, and as a work centred in a philosophy of the norm and normativity. In order to form a more complete picture of Canguilhem, I propose we add to the image of the rigorous historian of science that of the engaged philosophe and résistant. I believe that these elements of Canguilhem’s trajectory can, to a certain extent, shed light upon the way in which he thinks the problem of normativity.

As a philosophy student, Canguilhem was part of a group that gathered around the philosopher Alain (Émile Chartier), who had been his teacher in 1921 at the Lycée Henri IV, in the preparation courses to the admission in the École Normale Supérieure. In the École, Canguilhem was part of a group which became known as the “jeunes chartiéristes”, regularly contributing to Alain’s journal the *Libres Propos*. The group was animated by a pacifist engagement, which Canguilhem would call, in one of his early writings, “a politics” and “culture of peace”. According to Lecourt, in Alain, especially in his 1920 *Mars ou la Guerre jugée*, he found a doctrine of concrete and active antimilitarist rebellion. Not only was the impact of Alain on the young pacifist philosopher political – an impact that, as we will see,

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295 Œ1, 213, 215.

Canguilhem will develop in different directions, both during and after the Second World War. It was also philosophical and theoretical. Canguilhem was profoundly marked by Alain’s teaching. Despite the political disagreement that will oppose them from 1934-1935 (precisely concerning pacifism), Canguilhem will remain attached to Alain, being present “at the moment of his last breath in 1951”.

For Jean-François Braunstein, what Canguilhem found in Alain was a “philosophy of revolt”, which he interprets as an ethics of refusal and an intellectual rebellion against the worship of accomplished facts (“adoration du fait”). The concept clearly appears in Alain’s pacifist philosophical pamphlet Mars ou la Guerre jugée, whose premises were composed in the front of the First World War – in which he took part as a volunteer, an artilleryman in the trenches. In this book, Alain reacts against what he refers to as “the already too strong accomplished fact”. He criticises all those who make of thought and of the activity of the mind an act of submission, those cowardly or heartless thinkers, which he calls “lâches penseurs”. He writes: “Mes maîtres (...) furent lâches, travaillant de pensée à accepter tout et à s’accepter eux-mêmes dans leurs être immédiat”. Alain attacks those “penseurs sans jugement” who think of war as a necessity and therefore as a fact to be accepted; thinkers, therefore, who can no longer think, because they are no longer able to distinguish what depends on our will and active participation from what does not. Even to their own thought and mind, they look as if it were ‘thing’ or a ‘fact’, rather than a movement or an activity. In

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297 Canguilhem thought that when confronting fascism and Nazism, pacifism was no longer an answer: it defended peace just in words. This unconditional defence of peace led some of Alain’s followers to silence and collaborationism (Braunstein, “Canguilhem avant Canguilhem”, 14). Canguilhem, on the other hand, became a militant antifascist and would later join the Résistance networks. This departure from pacifism is clear in the conclusion of his 1939 book, with Camille Planet, where the authors write: “Here, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, one must choose” (Œ1, 922). This choice is no longer between an idealist or a realist morality, nor about war or pacifism. What is at stake are “des types d’organisation politique et sociale, conformes à un sens général et à une valeur donnée à la vie humaine, qui s’affrontent”. It is clear for the authors that a merely verbal defence of peace is no longer sufficient: it is the value of human life against barbarism that is at stake. And Canguilhem and Planet clearly choose an attitude of resistance and organisation (Œ1, 920).
298 Lecourt, Georges Canguilhem, 10.
301 Alain writes: “Le fait accompli a déjà assez de force” (Mars ou la guerre jugée. Paris : Gallimard, 1936, 196). In the Entretiens au bord de la mer the cult of accomplished facts is attributed to psychologists, but also to Spinoza, who sees perfection in the world: “cette perfection, que nous aimons contempler, aussitôt se renferme sur nous et nous emprisonne ; tout est fait et sans remède ; le temps périt” (29).
302 Alain, Mars, 94.
Mars, Alain claims that one should not simply passively ‘suffer’ reality, but that certain things in this reality can only come to existence from a voluntary action:

Adorateurs du fait, en eux-mêmes et autour d’eux. (...) Ainsi laissant agir en leurs pensées toutes les forces extérieures, et donnant à la nécessité figure de raison. Non pas seulement en ces choses qu’il faut subir, comme la pluie ou la neige, mais en ces choses qu’il faut vouloir et qui ne seront que si on les veut, comme justice et paix. 303

Thus, against the cult of the ‘fact’ and its lâches défendants, Alain offered a philosophy of ‘value’. And this, according to Braunstein, resonated profoundly with the concerns of the ‘early’ Canguilhem. The young thinker “n’accepte pas que le réel puisse être considéré comme un donné non susceptible de transformation” and proposes the task of never resigning before the order of things in the world [l’ordre du monde]. Like Alain before him, to the cult of facts and the “appetite for obedience of its proponents”, Canguilhem opposes the “exigence de valeur”. 304 For the young Alainian Canguilhem, reality itself is not independent of choice and evaluation – it is not, therefore, a given, but always the outcome of a process of sedimentation and crystallisation of innumerable choices that humanity had to make in the course of history, choices that are guided by values and which propose values. 305 Reflecting Alain’s philosophical attitude – which emphasises human action, freedom and the will and for whom “penser c’est vouloir”, “juger” and “dire non”, 306 the ‘early’ Canguilhem thinks it is always possible to opt for different values, which remain non-actualised possibilities throughout this history of contingent choices. 307

According to Xavier Roth, the young Canguilhem found in Alain, Jules Lagneau, and in the French Kantian tradition known as “analyse réflexive” a philosophical position to which he could relate, especially in that it posited the active and partisan position of the esprit in relation to the world of facts and a position that was critical of the mythification of ‘accomplished facts’. 308 The tradition of analyse réflexive emerges in the history of the French

303 Alain, Mars, 195.
305 Roth, Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience, 39.
306 Alain, Mars, 195, 197, 284-285, respectively.
307 As Roth explains: “Canguilhem partage avec Alain l’idée que tout fait social (...) repose en dernière instance sur un ensemble de valeurs instituées” (Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience, 39).
308 David Macey seems to bring Foucault closer to that tradition: “In the late 1940s and the 1950s, it was still possible for a student to trace his intellectual ancestry back to 1848 through a chain of masters. Although he was not actually taught by Canguilhem, Foucault regarded him as one of his intellectual masters. Canguilhem was the pupil of Alain, the incarnation of a certain radicalism, and Alain was the pupil of Lagneau” (The Lives of Michel Foucault, 22). I believe that Macey’s insight is correct, and that there are many points of contact between Foucault and the tradition of analyse réflexive, as for example the emphasis on the contingency of the existing order of reality and its
reception of Kant, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, with Lechelier, Lagneau, and Chartier. The particularity of this reception, Roth argues, is an emphasis on the notions of “original synthetic unity of apperception” (“unité originairement synthétique de l’aperception”) and “synthesis”. In these Kantian concepts, these thinkers find a description of the active position of the entendement or the esprit in relation to the world. In this sense, these authors assimilate Kant’s distinction, in the introduction to the “Transcendental Logic”, between the receptive character of intuition and the active, spontaneous character of understanding [entendement], emphasising the latter, not only from an epistemic perspective, but also from an ethical and axiological one. In the active – and organising – position of the understanding in relation to the world, they find space for human activity and value against a world of accomplished facts, advocated by a certain form of empiricism.

... dependence on our judgement, evaluation and action. Foucault could easily subscribe to Canguilhem’s (and Alain’s) critique of the accomplished fact. Another terrain where this approximation seems possible is the reading of Kant: for the thinkers of analyse réflexive, the first critique was to be read not only as an epistemological reflection on the conditions of possibility of knowledge and the legitimate use of reason, but also as an ethical and political reflection on our active role in constituting reality. Finally, in the introduction to the Use of Pleasure, Foucault’s definition of philosophy as “the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself” (UP, 9) perhaps point to further common ground in terms of philosophy understood as in its reflexive dimensions. For now, I must leave this issue to a future enquiry.

309 Roth, Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience, 60. It is, therefore, a reading that emphasises the “Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding”, namely §15 (for a definition of “synthesis”, especially B130) and §16 (especially B132, for a characterisation of the “original synthetic unity of apperception”), and thus the spontaneity and activity of synthesis that characterise understanding [entendement] and the unity of judgements expressed in the “I think” which must accompany all my representations. It is the centrality of the activity of thought which is present in every representation and the conscience of a qualitative unity underlying this activity that occupies a central role for this tradition.

310 In A50/B74, Kant writes: “Our knowledge springs from two fundamental sources of the mind; the first is the capacity of receiving representations (receptivity for impressions), the second is the power of knowing an object through these representations (spontaneity [in the production] of concepts)” (Critique of Pure Reason, 92). In A51/B75, he adds: If the receptivity of our mind, its power of receiving representations in so far as in any wise affected, is to be entitled sensibility, then the mind’s power of producing representations from itself, the spontaneity of knowledge, should be called understanding” (93). Intuition designates the mode we are affected by objects. Understanding is what allows us to think the object of sensible intuition. Kant maintains that one should not give preference to one of these poles over the other, since “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (A51/B75). In Roth’s reconstruction, the French analyse réflexive attributes a priority to the pole of understanding. As Alain writes in the Entretiens au bord de la mer: “Je pense qu’il faut finir par une philosophie de l’entendement”, which has ethical and political implications: “l’on n’a point encore rencontré sur cette planète une politique de l’entendement” (21-22).

311 This opposition to an idea of knowledge or perception as passive, which according to Roth, Alain and his master Lagneau develop, is clear in the Preface to the second edition of the Critique, where Kant writes (in B xvi) “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects (...). We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge”. It is the objects of the senses that must
In the operative dimension of thought, and particularly in this activity of synthesis which operates upon representations formed using the material of intuition, Lagneau and Alain find an active place for the human being, which is also a position of resistance and against a chaotic universe. The reflexive approach consists in a philosophy of judgement and value whose aim is to reveal, in the analysis of experience and perception, the activity of the *esprit* which freely orders or organises the world. As Roth explains:

If, for Kant, the transcendental subject was a purely logical and synthetical unity of *a priori* forms, Alain interprets it from a moral perspective: capacity of ordering and posing value onto a chaotic and indifferent matter.  

An important topic for this line of thought is the analysis of perception. In the field of a reflexive analysis of perception, Lagneau and Alain find the signature of the activity of the *esprit*, which gives form and value to a diverse plurality of impressions. Perception, then, is not passivity, but a product of the work of the *esprit* in its encounter with the world under the form of opposition, but a world it must also help constituting and organising. As Alain writes in *Souvenirs concernant Jules Lagneau*, “je tiens l’Esprit opposé aux faits, et cela est une leçon cent fois répétée de Lagneau”. Perception, therefore, is not a mere apprehension of what is *given*, but a laborious process and an engagement of the *esprit* with the world. The world itself is not a given, but a “tumultuous field of forces”, something which is constructed in the conflictual encounter with the *esprit*, which must introduce order and value in this tumult. One can clearly see how Canguilhem, through the mediation of Alain, found in this approach the intellectual grounds for his rebellion against the world of the given and the conservatisms its acceptance implies. For Alain, the critique of the given and to the worshippers of the fact – which is grounded in this research on the *entendement* conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, moreover: “Since I cannot rest in these intuitions if they are to become known, but must relate them as representations to something as their object, and determine this latter through them, either I must assume that the concepts, by means of which I obtain this determination, conform to the object, or else I assume that the objects, or (...) that experience in which alone, as given objects, they can be known, conform to the concepts (...). In the latter case the outlook is more hopeful. For experience is itself a species of knowledge which involves understanding...” (B xvii). The *analyse réflexive* accompanies this shift of emphasis from the object to the understanding. Moreover, given that the understanding is not a *thing* which presents itself as a phenomenon in intuition or the external sense, but rather refers to an activity – and active position before representations and every intuition –, this line of interpretation finds in the *esprit* the dwelling of freedom and dignity. Alain’s critique of psychology follows this line, in so far as he accuses psychologists of treating the mind as a thing, and thus of reifying it.

314 Roth, *Georges Canguilhem*, 51.
315 Alain writes: “Le creux de la mort, c’est selon moi l’ordre que je n’ai point fait (...) Méprisons donc l’ordre tel quel ; mais faisons un ordre” (*Entretiens au bord de la mer*, 28).
— is also a critique of power, which will inspire the political activism and antimilitarism of the young Canguilhem.316

What Alain discovers in the analysis of perception is this ‘permanent cosmogony’, a world that is always in debate with the esprit, and which is always in process of construction. Alain also understands this process from an ethical point of view: judgement is what links and brings together the plurality of intuition, but it is also the activity of evaluating, of organising the world through value.317 Alain attributes to this originally epistemological analysis of the entendement a role which we could call political, one of permanent activity of opposition and non-submission to a factual given.318 If judgement, for Kant, is the activity of assimilating and linking chaotic impressions to a factual given,319 the reflexive approach also finds in it a description of the ethical labour of human existence. Alain will emphasise this encounter between the active and form-giving pole of the esprit with a formless, chaotic and ever-changing world in Entretiens au bord de la mer, where an old painter invites his interlocutors to turn their gaze from the static forms of earth and stone, towards the dynamism of the sea: when regarding the ocean, the “object of choice for the entendement”, we separate our ideas from the things and their forms.320

But how could this philosophy, which assigns an important role to the subject as this active position before the world, which organises, evaluates and attributes meaning to it, contribute to an understanding of Canguilhem and Foucault? Following the latter’s analysis, it is precisely as a philosopher of the concept and of life that Canguilhem was able to offer an alternative to the philosophy of the subject that dominated the French intellectual field. In order to understand this, one must recall the fact that the concept, for Canguilhem, and as Foucault clearly explains, is not in opposition to life, but rooted in it.321 It is in the ‘errors’ of life, as Foucault puts it, that the concept finds its ground and source. Therefore, thinking of Canguilhem as a philosopher of the concept presupposes the acknowledgement of his philosophy of ‘life’. Now, it is in this category that Roth finds the paradoxical point of contact between the Canguilhem of the Normal and the Pathological and the style of thought of

316 See Braunstein, “Canguilhem avant Canguilhem”, 12.
317 In this sense, one could perhaps say that Alain’s reading extrapolates the meaning of ‘judgement’ posited by Kant in the introduction of the Critique of Pure Reason, associating the term with ethical and moral evaluation.
318 Roth, Georges Canguilhem, 71
319 “Penser, c’est juger, dit Kant, et juger c’est assimiler et lier les impressions chaotiques en une unité significative (synthèse)” (Roth, Georges Canguilhem 51).
320 Alain, Entretiens au bord de la mer, 20.
321 See “Life: Experience and Science” (EW2).
analyse réflexive. According to Roth, “Canguilhem exporte, sur le plan vital, les principes de cette philosophie de l’esprit et du jugement”.\(^{322}\) Canguilhem will situate in life those attributes of spontaneity, activity, and conflict with the ‘facts’ and the ‘given’ of the world and the imposition of a sort of order — that is to say, the organisation — to a world in itself multiple and chaotic, as well as evaluation and the unity in the positing of norms, which analyse réflexive referred to the esprit. The space that was once occupied by the Cogito is now taken by life and the living being. As Roth suggests:

Dans la perspective réflexive de Lagneau, l’activité de l’esprit se manifeste au sein d’une opposition philosophique entre la pensée et le monde. Un demi-siècle plus tard, Canguilhem transposera cette opposition sur un plan biologique, où le conflit ne se situerait plus seulement entre l’esprit et le monde, mais entre le vivant et son milieu (...) Il fera jouer jusqu’au bout l’analogie entre, d’un côté, l’esprit qui informe une matière chaotique, et de l’autre, le vivant qui organise l’environnement afin de faire du (...) du milieu son milieu.\(^{323}\)

But life, as Foucault explained, is also a ‘way out’ of a substantialising conception of the subject: in this displacement, from the Cogito to life, the subject is no longer a structure which would be self-evident and transparent to itself and open to the “truth of the world”.\(^{324}\) It is rather a contingent surface effect of the activity of life and its errors: one of the ways in which life debates with the world.\(^{325}\) If for Dagognet, life seems to be “the Cogito” of Canguilhem’s philosophy,\(^{326}\) for Roth, life is not the subject in the classic sense of term, since life would be a “subjectivité qui n’a pas conscience d’elle même”.\(^{327}\) In this sense, as Foucault

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322 Roth, Georges Canguilhem, 59. Later he writes: “Chez Canguilhem, à partir de 1943, la vie succède au Cogito dans ses fonctions ; en particulier de valorisation” (146).
323 Roth, Georges Canguilhem, 86.
324 As, according to Foucault, Descartes would have proposed it (EW2, 477). In a lecture form 6 January 1982, Foucault explains: “Actually, and here things are very simple, the Cartesian approach, which can be read quite explicitly in the Meditations placed self-evidence at the origin, the point of departure of the philosophical approach—self-evidence as it appears, that is to say as it is given, as it is actually given to consciousness without any possible doubt (...). The Cartesian approach [therefore] refers to knowledge of the self, as a form of consciousness at least. What’s more, by putting the self-evidence of the subject’s own existence at the very source of access to being, this knowledge of oneself (no longer in the form of the test of self-evidence, but in the form of the impossibility of doubting my existence as subject) made the “know yourself” into a fundamental means of access to truth” (HS, 14).
325 EW2, 477.
327 Roth, Georges Canguilhem, 136. I believe that Canguilhem’s position is actually more nuanced than this. He tries to avoid an anthropomorphic conception of life, that is a projection of human attributes on to life itself. In this sense, he claims that the of attributes one finds in human life can be found en germe in life itself (NP, 127). However, life can become aware of itself, specially through man and the human experience of disease: “Life rises to the consciousness and science of itself only through maladaptation, failure and pain” (NP, 209). In the same line of thought, he also defines disease as the speculative attention that life directs to itself through man (NP, 101).
explains in the *Order of Things*, life constitutes one of the elements of the unthought in which thought is rooted.\(^\text{328}\) Therefore, if life assumes this position of activity, it also breaks the sovereignty of a subject for whom its thinking activity coincided with its being and identity.

How and why Canguilhem passes from a philosophy of the *entendement* to a philosophy of life is a question that remains open.\(^\text{329}\) However, if we are to rely on Canguilhem’s own account of that transition, it is in medicine and in the *Résistance* that we must look for the reasons. In a 1995 interview, commenting his “Alainism” he says: “Cela m’a passé, et ce qui m’a fait passer cela c’est précisément l’occupation, la résistance et la suite... et la médecine”\(^\text{330}\).

### 3.1. Philosophy, Medicine and the “Concrete Human Problems”

Following Braunstein, Lecourt and Roth, I think it is appropriate to consider Canguilhem’s medicine thesis in the context of his philosophical trajectory. Situated within the philosophical concerns we have just delineated, my aim here is to present the contours of Canguilhem’s thought as presented in *The Normal and the Pathological*, as well as the problems it poses. Given the scarce material available on Canguilhem’s work in English, my proposition is also an introduction to Canguilhem’s philosophy. However, no reconstruction can be done from a neutral and totalising perspective: one must always operate selections and exclusions.

My choice is to present Canguilhem not only as a historian of science, but as a philosopher. Although the *Normal and the Pathological* draws the material it analyses mostly from the history of physiology, pathology and medicine, one must not reduce it to a work of

\(^{328}\) OT, 324-325, 327.

\(^{329}\) The problem of the transition from a philosophy of the *entendement* to a philosophy of life would deserve further study, which I cannot undertake here. For a more detailed discussion, see Roth, *Georges Canguilhem*, 140. I believe that even in his approach to this complex problem what Roth does is more opening a path of investigation, than actually exploring the ways in which Canguilhem passes from a philosophy based on Kant’s ‘Transcendental Analytic’ to a philosophy of life, grounded in empirical biology and pathology. Perhaps one of the reasons for this shift is Canguilhem’s medical studies and his reading of Goldstein (to which Roth attributes a secondary philosophical importance in relation to Alain, for example). Another path I would like to consider in a future study is the impact of a reading of Nietzsche in this transition, since Canguilhem’s texts on technique – written between the very early writings and the medicine thesis – often mention Nietzsche (See Œ1). Another figure that could have played an important role in this transition is Comte, on whose work he wrote a dissertation and in whom he finds a new version of the Kantian project.

\(^{330}\) Bing & Braunstein, “Entretien avec Georges Canguilhem”, in Bing; Braunstein; Roudinesco, *Actualité de Georges Canguilhem*, 129.
“history of science” – which has become a sort of assumption or ‘common place’ regarding Canguilhem’s book (and his work as a whole). In the “Introduction” he clearly situates his work in the field of a philosophical investigation or, as he puts it, of “philosophical speculation”: “The present work is thus an effort to integrate some of the methods and attainments of medicine into philosophical speculation”. It is clear, then, from the introduction, that Canguilhem presents his thesis as a work that seeks to integrate philosophical speculation and the methods and acquisitions of medicine in its contact with the concrete experiences of human beings. If the book is not a work in history of medicine, Canguilhem argues that he approached the problem from a historical perspective “only for reasons of greater intelligibility”.

Moreover, in the preface to the second edition, Canguilhem mentions the fact that “certain readers were struck by the brevity of his conclusions, and by the fact that they leave the door open to philosophy”. And he adds that this was intentional, since he also thought of his medicine thesis as the groundwork for a “future philosophy thesis”.

As we will see, following Canguilhem’s “Introduction”, his project could be characterised by a displacement of philosophy towards “matters that are foreign to it”, since, according to him, philosophy is “a discipline to which all foreign matters are good”. For Canguilhem this displacement is to be done through medical education and represents an attempt of philosophy to reach “concrete human problems”. Here we could situate a series of problems which regard human experience such as pain, disease, illness and death. Moreover, Canguilhem clearly states the philosophical problems which he aims to analyse through this historical approach to medicine: the problem the relations between science and technique and the problem of norms and the normal.

In the study of medicine, the path proposed by Canguilhem is still philosophical. In this path, philosophy must however work with matters that concern the urgencies of human

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331 NP, 34.
332 “We want to contribute to the renewal of certain methodological concepts by adjusting their comprehension by contact with medical information” (NP, 34 [8-9]). From now on, I will use the square brackets to indicate the page numbers in the French original, especially when I introduce some different phrasing or retranslate the quoted passages.
333 NP, 34 [9].
334 NP, 32 [6].
335 NP, 33 [7]. The English translation uses the term ‘unknown’ for the French ‘étrangère’, which I believe is not a good choice, given the fact that something ‘unknown’ can be part of a same field of knowledge; with the term foreign, Canguilhem suggests that philosophy must look for its material in other domains of human experience.
336 NP, 34 [8].
existence. As Roth puts it, history of science or, more precisely, the history of scientific concepts would serve as a means to an end (“philosophical speculation”). Through a reference to Descartes’ expression ‘lavorus prodeo’, Roth characterised Canguilhem as a sort of ‘masked philosopher’, advancing philosophical investigation beneath the mask of history of science and scientific concepts.\(^{337}\) For Roth, in Canguilhem’s work, “the means (history of concepts) would mask the end (philosophy)”.\(^{338}\) Indeed, in different occasions, underlying Canguilhem’s analyses of the history of science, we find robust philosophical concepts such as that of life as “activity of opposition to inertia and to indifference”\(^{339}\) or that of vital normativity, life’s plasticity in the creation and variation of its own norms, which we will later analyse.

However, if we analyse Canguilhem’s “Introduction” to the thesis, we will see that philosophy was not a hidden agenda operating underneath the erudite exercise in the history of medicine, as Roth suggests. On the contrary, the philosophical aim of the book is openly and clearly stated: to “renew philosophical speculation” by putting it in contact with “medical information”\(^{340}\). The purpose thus is not that of a hidden philosophical thinking underneath medical issues, but rather of a philosophy cultivated or educated in medicine, and therefore relying not only on thought itself, but on the very centrality of the experience of human suffering, the experience of sickness, trouble, and the polemical debate between the living organism and the world.

For these philosophical aims, the history of the scientific concepts and experiences plays a central role. Differently from Roth, I believe it is possible to say that this historical path, the analysis of different documents and historical sources, could also be considered in itself, that is, as a legitimate historical investigation, revealing the origins foundations and presuppositions of certain theories and concepts in physiopathology, especially the theories he calls *qualitative* and *quantitative*. In this sense, if considering Canguilhem only as a historian of science represents an impoverished or incomplete image of his work, we perhaps cannot fully grasp its philosophical dimension without the history it presupposes. Therefore, the historical work undertaken by Canguilhem in the 1943 thesis cannot be considered as accessory or secondary, since the philosophical reflection he proposes is only done through the historical investigation of medicine, physiology and pathology.

\(^{337}\) Roth, Georges Canguilhem, 15.
\(^{338}\) Roth, Georges Canguilhem, 16.
\(^{339}\) NP, 236.
\(^{340}\) NP, 34.
Another way to describe the relation between philosophical project and historical work is offered by Jacques Piquemal in his article “Georges Canguilhem, professeur de Terminale (1937-1938)”\textsuperscript{341}. According to Piquemal, Canguilhem uses the history of science, the history of the concepts of cell, milieu, reflex, regulation, among others, to support \textit{[appuyer]} his philosophical positions. The history of concepts would then be a series of ‘strategic detours’ in the general economy of Canguilhem’s philosophical discourse. This position seems to imply that the philosophical positions pre-exist the close investigation of the medical problems and their history, as if they found in medicine and its history \textit{a posteriori} support, rather than emerging in the contact with them.

Although my choice here is to emphasise the reading of the “Canguilhem philosopher”, I believe that there is more in his work on the history of science than a mere instrumental relationship: I think that the philosophical positions emerge out of the historical analyses, and they require that historical path in order to acquire their full meaning and relevance.\textsuperscript{342} Canguilhem’s interest in the history of medicine, physiology and pathology is legitimate and has a place of its own, also because his formation as a doctor (as well as his activity, during the Second World War, and his practice of medicine in the context of the \textit{Résistance}). In this sense, I do not think we can say, with Gutting, that Canguilhem is only a historian of science sensible to the philosophical implications of historical work nor a philosopher who only instrumentally uses the history of science.\textsuperscript{343} Rather, I believe there are two possible legitimate emphases or levels of reading: one could read the Canguilhem philosopher and the Canguilhem historian, but to acquire a more complete picture of his project, one must not forget that these two levels also operate together, complement each other, foster and ground each other. With this in mind, my choice is to pursue the indications

\textsuperscript{341} Piquemal, J. “Canguilhem, professeur de Terminale (1937-1938)”. \textit{Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale}, 90, 1985, 63-83.

\textsuperscript{342} In this sense, I propose a methodological caution when following Braunstein and Roth in relating the \textit{Normal and the Pathological} to the early writings and to thinkers such as Lagneau and Alain. In order to not fall into the trap of a history of ideas built upon the presuppositions of lineages and affiliations, I believe that we should read the \textit{Normal and the Pathological} not as mere continuation of the school if \textit{analyse réflexive}, but in relation both to Canguilhem’s own medical training and to the context in which the research and writing of the thesis took place. This avoids a sort of projection according to which Canguilhem’s philosophical ideas were already formed and ‘ready’ previously to his medicine studies, and that he only found evidence and support for those insights which would, therefore, organise the totality of his philosophical trajectory. I believe this sort of position is not accurate and, if we are really to understand the reach and importance of notions such as ‘vital normativity’, we must relate them to problems Canguilhem analyses and to which they respond. In the case of ‘vital normativity’, for example, one must consider his analysis of the experience of sickness and illness, and how he is, with this analysis, proposing a new conception of physiology. This cannot be found in Alain or Lagneau.

\textsuperscript{343} Gutting, \textit{Michel Foucault’s Archaeology of Scientific Reason}, 32.
of Canguilhem’s “Introduction” and trying to understand the philosophical stakes of Canguilhem’s historical approach in the medicine thesis.

The philosophical problem that Canguilhem privileges in his exposition is that of the definition of the nature of sickness, of the pathological, and its place in the human experience of life. What is sickness? Does it represent mere lack, a deficiency or an excess in relation to the healthy state and way of being? Or does it create a new position, a new way of living and navigating the world? Through the analysis of this problem, he aims at addressing two other philosophical questions: the place of technique in human existence (and its relation to science) and the notions of norm and normality.

Canguilhem’s discussion of the history of medicine, physiology and pathology is also philosophical in a different sense. The historical enterprise undertaken in the *Normal and the Pathological* plays a role of the reconstruction of both the thesis that Canguilhem intends to refute (namely, the one according to which “pathological phenomena are identical to corresponding normal phenomena save for quantitative variations”), \(^{344}\) and to set the historical grounds of the thesis he defends. This thesis is related to a more general philosophical task, which the author states in the “Préface de la deuxième édition”, that is “to introduce History into Life” [“introduire l’Histoire dans la Vie”].\(^ {345}\) It is precisely through a philosophical analysis of the experience of sickness, as well as through a revisiting of the main theories on the nature of the pathological, that Canguilhem intends to show that every living form has its own history, creating its own path in the world, and that there is no such thing as life without norms and forms. This is to say that every living being, that every life also presupposes a ‘form of life’ that must be thought throughout time: the time of its persistence in existence, but also the non-reversible time of its crises and infractions.\(^ {346}\) This historical and philosophical exploration of sickness and health also leads Canguilhem to address another philosophical question of central importance: what is normal and normality?

It is through the effort to develop and, to a certain extent, answer the question regarding the nature and status of the pathological in life, that Canguilhem’s philosophical project acquires historical contours. His reflections on the notion of pathological (and on

\(^{344}\) NP, 35.

\(^{345}\) NP, 31 [5].

\(^{346}\) More specifically, Canguilhem explains, disease is “chronological succession” and interruption of a “course” (NP, 138), which is to say, disease presuppose a relationship between life and norms in time – and, therefore, a history. I discuss this issue in detail below.
normality) constitute the main way through which he will introduce “History in the domain of Life”, and the way in which he will approach his discussion on norms. This question regarding the pathological modalities of life acquires, in his thesis, the traits of a historical and critical examination of two different positions regarding the nature of the pathological. *Grosso modo*, these two different theses guide the exposition of the two main sections of the 1943 medicine thesis, namely: “Is the Pathological State Merely a Quantitative Modification of the Normal State?”, the first part, and “Are There Sciences of the Normal and of the Pathological?”, the second part. As it is clear by the titles, each part investigates a clearly delimited field of problems, and tries to respond to a particular question. However, in the reflection, analysis of sources and historical discussion, Canguilhem puts forward his own theses and concepts.

In the first part of the thesis, Canguilhem is more concerned with setting up the problem, reconstructing the main theories which attempted to solve it, for philosophy is, after all, the discipline which attempts at re-opening problems which are considered already solved.347 Canguilhem situates the historical grounds and presuppositions of the thesis he wants to critically engage with. In this sense, the method he mobilises consists more clearly in a historical and critical examination of the notions of *normal* and *pathological* and the quantitative understanding of them, particularly as proposed by Comte, Broussais and Bernard. Moreover, Canguilhem’s procedure in the first part of the thesis seems to be a classic case of indirect argumentation, in which his own thesis emerges out of the refutation of contrary theses. In this first part, the question regarding the nature of the normal and the pathological acquires a specific form: is it a mere quantitative variation of a normal state given or established *a priori* or is it a new reality? Before we analyse Canguilhem’s historical development aiming at responding to this question, let us say a few words regarding its relation to the second part of his thesis.

If, on the one hand, the whole enterprise of the *Normal and the Pathological* is historical and critical, on the other, one could also say that one of the main differences between the first and the second part is the way in which they relate to Canguilhem’s own positions. Whereas the first part is mainly ‘negative’, that is to say, it reconstructs the theses which articulate the nature of the pathological as quantitative departures of the normal state, in order to refute them, reveal their flaws and internal contradictions and hidden presuppositions, the second part could be said to be ‘positive’ or constructive. The second

347 NP, 35.
part builds upon the historical and critical examination of scientific theories developed in the first part. In this sense, in the second part, he positively develops a *qualitative* conception based on the notion of *norm* (a notion which emerged as the implicit presupposition of the discussions of the first part). In the second part, his main thesis states that the *pathological* is a relative concept which refers to the individual experience of sickness and of the norms by which the organism lives. The main “Canguilhemian” concept of the thesis (drawing on Kurt Goldstein, particularly)\(^\text{348}\) is that of *vital or biological normativity*, closely linked to the notion of *life*, which will be particularly relevant for our discussion. Once again, through these notions of norm and normativity, Canguilhem ties the second part to his general task – which reappears in different ways throughout part two – of historicising life or the vital. Broadly speaking, in part two, Canguilhem explores the conceptual framework of norm and normativity, which seems to emerge from the framework of clinical thought, applying it to the analysis of medicine as technique and an “art of life”: an art or technique concerned with the maintenance, change or creation of norms of life.

Moreover, the effort of part two is also constructive in the sense that Canguilhem uses the concepts that emerged from his critical and historical analysis to look especially at human reality, applying it to social life, habits, human geography and human ecology. As we will see, this happens because, when it comes to the living human being, vital normativity acquires a specific form, which include social and collective factors, and is therefore social normativity: the rules, forms and ways of life which emerge in the context of particular groups, religions, ritual practices, rhythms of life describe the way in which vital normativity expresses itself in human beings.

Finally, the last two chapters of the second part\(^\text{349}\) develop the notions of normal, physiological and pathological from the perspective of the human experience of norms (again, referring back to the pedagogical task of philosophy in its ‘medical education’, that is, to learn “about concrete human problems” through the experience of disease). The


\(^{349}\) Chapter IV, “Disease, Cure, Health” and Chapter V “Physiology and Pathology".
fundamental concept in Canguilhem’s definition of health and disease is that of “normativity”, understood as the capacity to challenge, transform and create new norms of life and ways of life. Disease is defined in relation to the norms of life and the loss of a normative position of the living in relation to itself, to its world and surroundings and to others. As I will show, illness is not, therefore, the absence of norms, but the restriction and diminishing of what one can do with the norms that shape one’s life or, still, the fixation or normalisation of oneself in the space delimited by norms one can no longer change.

On the other hand, the philosophical reflection on healing, on the cure of disease, also relies on the same concepts. Canguilhem attributes key importance to the trajectory, the parcours of an organism throughout the experimentation of different norms and forms of living: all life, all organism has a history of norms and a history of its own deployment of normativity, when traversing health and sickness. In this sense, precisely, another important concept which defines both life in general (and human life in particular) is that of dynamic polarity, which explains how the movement of stagnation, crystallisation or, on the other end of the spectrum, invention and creation of norms takes place. It is in this context that Canguilhem puts forward a specific concept of life, or a particular form of vitalism.

A problem that one could raise is that of the validity of Canguilhem’s historical material and sources, especially in this second part of the book, where his positive philosophical developments seem to rely on the material and the achievements of the science and medicine of his time. If this historical material is essential to Canguilhem’s claims, as we have argued, then once it becomes obsolete, the whole project put forward in the Normal and the Pathological would be invalidated. Indeed, today, seven decades after the writing of the 1943 Essais sur quelques problèmes concernant le normal et le pathologique, medicine has been through a series of changes and developments. The later developments of genetics and molecular biology in the second half of the twentieth century and, more recently, the advancement of neuroscience could seem to invalidate Canguilhem’s medicine thesis, especially in what regards its medical information. As Claude Debru writes:

In the course of the last fifty years, genetics, cellular and molecular biology and the whole of medical disciplines have created a world of representations and practices which no longer has anything to do with the world in which, in the end of the 1930s and in the 1940s and 1950s, Canguilhem lived, formulated his main themes of reflection and acted. These disciplines,
particularly active during the 1950s and 1960s, left far behind qualitative models in physiopathology and brought discredit to vitalist speculations.\footnote{Debru, “Introduction. Présence de Georges Canguilhem”, in Fagot-Largeault, Debru, Morange, Han (Ed.), Philosophie et médecine. En hommage à Georges Canguilhem. Paris : Vrin, 2013, 9.}

In this context, a number of propositions presented in 1943 would have to be reassessed. Does that make \emph{The Normal and the Pathological} an obsolete document of the development of medicine and its epistemology? Consider, for instance, the thesis concerning the identification of sickness which Canguilhem considered possible only at a subjective level, that is, clinics as the “first, historically speaking, and last, logically speaking, word about pathology”\footnote{NP, 226.}. For Roth, this thesis would be unsustainable today – and Canguilhem himself would have later discarded it.\footnote{Roth, Georges Canguilhem, 12.}

Nonetheless, Canguilhem’s book however continues to arouse interest. How to explain this fact? According to Debru, the thesis is still meaningful to us, today:

It also speaks of something other than its declared [or indicated] themes, such as physiology and pathology, science and technique, norm and value, diabetes, electroshock, of the illness of neuroglioma and sick cells. It also speaks of that which, in us, is living [of that which is living within us]. Based upon that, it gives a magistral life lesson and thus accomplishes the highest aim of philosophy.\footnote{Debru, “Introduction”, 9.}

As Roth spells out, the life that Canguilhem analyses in the \emph{Normal and Pathological} is, for us, understood both in its biological and existential sense.\footnote{Roth, Georges Canguilhem, 13.} Here, medical and biological concern cannot be separated from a striking ethical concern. This is clear in Canguilhem’s attention to clinical practice as responding to human urgency and suffering. And it becomes even clearer if we attempt to read it in continuity with his early writings – from that angle, Canguilhem’s reflections on life and its norms cannot but appear in its relation to a philosophy and an active practice of resistance.

Furthermore, the 1943 medicine thesis also tells a story of the struggles of a life that constantly gambles with and fights against death,\footnote{NP, 236.} a life which means constant and active evaluation and \emph{‘prise de position’}. How could one not find an existential sense in the epic of this life that is its own journey, its transit and trajectory in the world (a world it constantly contributes in shaping), a life which must propose different norms facing all sorts of challenges and risks? How not to read this story of life against death as the story of our own
life in its precarity? Independently of the particular scientific formulations with which Canguilhem thinks, the 1943 thesis remains a book of ethics, or the document of a fundamental ethical concern and a political struggle for the instauration of a norm against destruction and death. Composed during the war and in spite of the war, this book remains a testimony written in the heat of a turbulent moment and whose author was an active participant.

The *Normal and the Pathological* is the first monographic study of a rigorous historian of science, but is also a book of a partisan, for whom the exercise of medicine cannot be separated from resistance. The *Résistance* is, for Canguilhem, not only a historical landmark but an event in thought and a philosophical experience. A testimony of this importance can be found in Canguilhem’s homage to his fellow epistemologist and political comrade Jean Cavaillès. On different occasions, Canguilhem pays tribute to his friend.

Since 1934, Canguilhem took up militant anti-fascist activity joining the “*Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes*”. But it is around 1941 that Cavaillès invites him to take part in the actions of the *Résistance* that were being organised in the territory. Canguilhem then joins the Libération-Sud movement, adopting the name Lafont. Lafont-Canguilhem will practice medicine during the war. As Canguilhem tells us, it is only in war and because of the war that he acts as a doctor: “J’ai pratiqué une médecine à ma manière pendant quelques semaines dans les maquis d’Auvergne”.

To define Canguilhem’s book and his activity of the period, exploring the implicit space they share – an enterprise that always risks fictional projections – we could perhaps use Gramsci’s expression: to live means to be partisan (*vivere vuol dire essere partigiani*). Canguilhem’s work is, in this sense, a manifesto against indifference, vital and political, and a document of a struggle for the instauration of a new norm of life, against fascist violence.

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358 “Ce qui a tout déclenché, c’est le fait que mon ami Cavaillès venait de fonder avec d’Astier de la Vigerie le mouvement de résistance ‘Libération’” (Bing & Braunstein, “Entretien avec Georges Canguilhem”, 122).


360 Bing & Braunstein, “Entretien avec Georges Canguilhem”, 122.

361 *La Città futura*, 11 febbraio 1917.
Two fundamental notions from Canguilhem’s 1943 medicine thesis will be particularly important for our analysis of the book (as well as of our reading of Foucault’s work), namely: norm and normativity. As we have seen, Canguilhem understood the philosophical enterprise through its active effort to problematise: for him, philosophy was not a collection of still or crystallised doctrines, answers or solutions. Thus, in order to understand the notions of norm and normativity as they are formulated in *The Normal and the Pathological*, we must first look at the problems from which these notions emerge.

We have already highlighted the way in which Canguilhem describes his studies of medicine. It is neither to “become a doctor” nor to do the “history of medicine” that he engages in medical education, but rather to go beyond the “bookish” philosophical education he had received, finding in medicine a way to gain access to what he called the “concrete human problems”, which, I suggested, cannot be separated from Canguilhem’s ethical concern with human experience. As we have seen, following Canguilhem’s own account, two main philosophical problems led him to the study of medicine: “It seemed to us that the two problems which concerned us, that of the relations between science and technology, and that of the norms and the normal, had to profit from a direct medical education for their precise position and clarification”.

In the field of medicine, and precisely in that of the clinic and therapeutics Canguilhem found a fertile space to explore these two fundamental philosophical problems. But the problem of therapeutic techniques (and, of course, of their relation to scientific knowledge as well as of their effort of restoring a normal state) only acquires its meaning when confronted with “the problem of pathological structures and behaviours in man”. It is to this ‘concrete problem’ that the need for therapy responds: the problem of sickness, the experience that Lecourt defined as the “painful” or “suffering conscience of the obstacle that one encounters in the exercise and deployment [déploiement] of one’s organic

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363 NP, 33.
364 NP, 33.
potentialities”. It is through the obstacles and hindrances of sickness that norms and the normal are called into question.

What is the pathological state and what are its relations to the normal? This question has occupied philosophers and physicians alike, from Comte and Bernard to Leriche and Goldstein. In order to revisit and critically assess this thesis, Canguilhem again turns it into a question, which will guide the investigation of the first part of the book: “Is the pathological state nothing but a quantitative modification of the normal state?” Let us now turn to the first part of the Normal and the Pathological.

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365 Lecourt, Georges Canguilhem, 39.
Chapter 4

The Normal and the Pathological

In this chapter, I present the key ideas of Canguilhem’s 1943 medicine thesis, as well as some of its philosophical implications. My exposition is structured along two axes: the first, which I call *pars destruens*, analyses Canguilhem’s exploration and critique of the quantitative thesis. The second, which I call *pars construens*, shows how, on the basis of the critique developed in the first part, Canguilhem puts forward his own conceptions.

In the history of philosophical and medical thought, Canguilhem identifies two dominant and conflicting views of the pathological, which we could call the quantitative and the qualitative theses. In Canguilhem’s narrative, the qualitative conception of sickness, which proposes a radical heterogeneity between the normal and the pathological, precedes the quantitative. It was marked by “ontological” conception of disease, which locates sickness in the body, and which represents it by embodied by a foreign substance against which the organism fights. This view is clear in the notion of the “germ”. Another version of this qualitative conception of disease was a dynamic conception, which understood it as a state of disturbance or disequilibrium between opposing forces in the body. A clear example of this dynamic conception is, for Canguilhem, Hippocratic medicine and its theory of the humours. According to this theory, “external circumstances” would be “the occasion but not the cause” of disease. Not only would the latter be a state of disequilibrium (of and among the different humours), but and “perhaps most important, an effort on the part of nature to effect a new equilibrium in man”. Disease would then be a reaction “to bring about cure,” an “effort to get well”, and human technical and therapeutic action addressing disease would be but an effort to imitate, extend or reinforce this sort of spontaneous therapy.

On the one hand, “medical thought never stopped alternating between these two forms of the qualitative representations of disease” (i.e. foreign presence and dynamic disequilibrium). On the other, the human need for therapy and for controlled action over the phenomena of sickness and suffering seemed to require a different conception, which

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366 NP, 40.
367 NP, 41.
368 NP, 40.
369 NP, 41.
would provide scientific grounds and maximise the possibilities of successful intervention, beyond spontaneous curative processes of the body. As Canguilhem explains, “It proved difficult to maintain the qualitative modification separating the normal and the pathological in a conception which allows and indeed expects man to be able to compel nature and bend it to his normative desires”. The quantitative conception of disease emerges, then, out of a theoretical effort to understand in which way disease relates to the normal state, “which the living man – loving life – wants to regain”. As we will see, this quantitative conception will be formed by linking pathology to physiology: for it is in physiology that one finds the key to understand the causes and nature of disease. In pathology we find exaggerated expressions of characteristics of normal physiology, as though shown through a “magnifying glass”. Its core belief – the continuity existing between physiological and pathological states – is linked to the idea “that one can scientifically restore the norm”. But because its emphasis in the normal physiological state, its laws and limits, the quantitative conception “annuls the pathological”.

4.1. Pars destruens: The Quantitative Thesis

Let us begin by more carefully analysing the quantitative view, which from the perspective of the relations between science and technique that it implies could also be called “positivist” thesis. According to this conception, pathological states would be mere quantitative deviations of a pre-established normal state. This conception is the foundation for defining pathologies through prefixes which indicate a departure from a given normal state, which is clear in the use of particles such as hyper- or hypo- (instead of the qualitative dys-). These indicate lack or excess of attributes, dispositions and characteristics that already exist in the living being. Pathology does not represent a new state or quality in life, but only a variation of something that remains qualitatively the same. Canguilhem presents Auguste Comte and Claude Bernard as its main representatives in nineteenth century France. Through their pen, this thesis has become a “scientific guaranteed dogma”.

370 NP, 41.
371 NP, 41.
372 NP, 43.
373 NP, 43.
374 “Semantically, the pathological is designated as departing from the normal not so much by α- or dys- but by hyper- or hypo-” (NP, 42).
375 NP, 43.
Comte sees disease as a substitute for experimentation in biology, which would help us gaining knowledge of the normal state. He is interested in the modifications of the normal state in order to determine its laws. In Canguilhem’s words, “Comte’s interest moves from the pathological to the normal with a view to determining speculatively the laws of the normal”.  

Bernard’s interest, on the other hand, is therapeutic: it “moves from the normal to the pathological with a view towards a rational action” of “remedying the pathological”, which Canguilhem describes as a “non-empirical therapeutics” in which “the knowledge of disease is sought by means of physiology and deriving form it”. Thus, by knowing and establishing the features of the normal state, we can act upon all the pathological variations in order to restore the former. This relationship between knowledge and practical outcomes, the increasing of the power and efficacy of action, for Canguilhem, the key of this positivist position.

Following Canguilhem’s account, Comte credits Broussais for linking physiology and pathology, “having declared that all disturbances of vital functions could not take place without lesions in organs, or rather, tissues”. From Broussais, Comte extracts a principle to which will give universal significance:

Broussais described all diseases as consisting essentially in ‘the excess or lack of excitation in the various tissues above or below the degree established as the norm’. Thus, diseases are merely the effects of simple changes in intensity in the action of stimulants which are indispensable for maintaining health.

Through the so-called ‘Broussais’ principle’, Comte defines the modifications of disease as mere changes in intensity and variations of degree of phenomena that remain the same – in their quality, nature and arrangement – as described by physiology. In his reading of Broussais’ treatise De l’irritation et de la folie, Canguilhem shows that, for the physician, “Man exists only through the excitation exercised on his organs by the environment on which he is compelled to live. Through their innervation both the internal and external surfaces of

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376 NP, 43.
377 NP, 43.
378 "Il revient très souvent, tout au long de son œuvre, sur la critique de ce qu’il appelle la ‘maxime positiviste fondamentale’, ‘aussi trompeuse qu’elle est célèbre’ : ‘savoir pour prévoir afin de pouvoir’. Cette critique vise d’ailleurs pas seulement Comte, mais aussi Bacon, le Descartes de la VIe partie du Discours de la méthode et bien d’autres auteurs ‘de Vinci à Marx en passant par les Encyclopédistes ou Comte’” (Braunstein, “Canguilhem avant Canguilhem”, 19).
379 NP, 47.
380 NP, 48 [24].
contact transmit this excitation to the brain, which sends it back to all tissues”. Broussais then describes the pathological state as a variation of this normal excitation – both as lack or excess (or “irritation”). In Comte’s view, “until Broussais, the pathological state obeyed laws completely different from those governing the normal state”. Broussais, in his turn, showed that they essentially coincided.

Comte adopts this view, claiming that the observation of the variations that characterise disease “form a series of indirect experiments”. Indeed, in the *Cours de philosophie positive*, Comte defines an experiment as being always “designed to uncover the laws by which each determining or modifying influence of a phenomenon affects its performance”. It usually consists in introducing controlled change into a designated condition (where other influences are computed and controlled) and, then, measuring “the corresponding variation of the phenomenon itself”. These changes must be “contained within certain limits compatible with the phenomenon’s existence”. In the case of human beings, however, the field of possible experimentation is necessarily reduced, given the limits in terms of intervention and its possibly detrimental consequences, especially considering the chances of technical failure. According to this definition, then, “Disease is, in effect, an experiment of the subtlest order, instituted by nature itself in very precise circumstances and unavailable to human skill…” Therefore, diseases, in Comte’s view, “function for scientists as spontaneous experiments because, through the variation (...) of phenomena of the normal state, they allow a comparison to be made between an organism’s various abnormal states and its normal state”.

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381 NP, 54. Canguilhem shows that this conception of “excitation” as a fundamental phenomenon of life, capable of describing health and disease as homogenous states, comes from the Scottish physician John Brown (1735-1788), who claimed that “life is sustained by means of one particular property alone, excitability, which allows living organisms to be affected and react (NP, 58). Based on that presupposition, Brown argues that “health and disease are the same state depending upon the same cause, that is, excitement [or excitation], varying only in degree; and the powers producing both are the same, sometimes acting with a proper degree of force, at other times with too much or too little; that the role and sole province of a physician is not to look for morbid states and remedies that have no existence, but to consider the deviation of excitement from the healthy standard, in order to remove it by proper means” (NP, 58).

382 NP, 58.
383 NP, 49.
384 NP, 50.
385 NP, 50.
386 NP, 50.
387 NP, 45.
388 NP, 51.
In his *Système de politique positive*, Comte shows the *sociological* and *political* importance of Broussais’ conclusions, applying the findings of the physician to the “collective organism”. In this sense, Comte’s analogy would suggest that, just like disease represents a pathological state in the individual organism, helping the scientist to uncover its normal structures and laws, so in society, the pathological states which revolutions embody would elucidate the nature of society in its normal and healthy state. As Comte explains:

> The collective organism, because of its greater degree of complexity, has problems more serious, varied and frequent that those of the individual organism. I do not hesitate to state that Broussais’ principle must be extended to this point and I have often applied it to confirm or perfect sociological laws. But the analysis of revolutions could not illuminate the positive study of society without the logical initiation resulting, in this respect, from the simplest cases presented by biology.\(^{389}\)

At this point, Comte’s extension of the scope of “Broussais’ principle”, reaching universal validity – which includes social and political reality – can shed light on a series of aspects of Canguilhem’s reading and critique of the quantitative hypothesis. The first aspect of his critique is the implicitly *qualitative* and *normative* conceptions underlying Comte’s reflections on the relation between normal and pathological. The second is related to Comte’s aims and intentions – and how these can more generally reveal what Guillaume Le Blanc called a “philosophy” or an “ideology of order”\(^ {390}\) underlying the quantitative thesis. Analysing these aspects of the quantitative thesis will allow us to return to the critique of the ‘cult of the accomplished fact’, which we discussed when stressing the philosophical scope of Canguilhem’s work.

Let us begin by looking at Canguilhem’s analysis of the first problem, namely that of the paradox generated by the presence of a *qualitative* norm underlying the quantitative thesis as articulated by Comte. As we have seen, in his reading of Broussais’ principle, Comte concluded that pathological phenomena are never “able to produce really new phenomena: going more or less beyond the higher or lower limits proper to each phenomenon of the normal organism”.\(^ {391}\) This formulation expresses what Canguilhem sees as the paradoxical aspect of Comte’s conception. As we have seen, Comte believed that disease represented a spontaneous form of experiment, allowing us to determine the laws of the normal state; though the observation of the pathological we discover of the laws of the normal. At the same time, Comte also described the quantitative variations that constitute pathology as

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\(^{389}\) NP, 49-50.

\(^{390}\) Le Blanc, *Canguilhem et les normes*, 36-37.

\(^{391}\) Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive* quoted in NP, 51.
“going beyond the higher or lower limits of variation proper to each phenomenon of the organism”. This seems to presuppose that in order to identify the pathological quantitative variations, we must already know what the normal state is, that is to say, “we must have prior knowledge of the corresponding normal state”. As Canguilhem explains: “Comte insists repeatedly on the necessity of determining the normal and its true limits of variation first, [that is] before methodologically investigating pathological cases”.

The paradox, then, is that the knowledge of the normal is both based in the observation of diseases as nature’s spontaneous experiments and “possible and necessary” without disease. To put in different words, the knowledge of the normal is supposed to be both presupposed and discovered in the experiments of sickness. If we return to Comte’s quote, we can note that in his definition of the pathological phenomena as mere extensions and variations of the normal state, he also qualifies them in relation to “the higher and lower limits proper to each phenomenon”. It is precisely this idea of proper limits which seems to presuppose that one already knows what the normal state is when observing quantitative variations. That is, one seems to refer the states produced by these variations to a state or condition previously determined, which then functions as a norm. This is how Comte’s theory (and the Broussais’ principle underlying it) appears to Canguilhem as implicitly normative and qualitative, since “excess and deficiency exist in relation to a scale deemed valid and suitable – hence in relation to a norm”. Who would neglect the moral significance of terms such as lack and excess beyond the “proper limits”? One could ask, however, what is this underlying norm, this qualitative concept which will serve as the scale to assess variations and deviations as pathological? Exploring this question leads us to our second problem – that of Comte’s ‘philosophy of order’ and therefore to his aims and intentions, as well as the social and political implications of his theories.

392 NP, 51.
393 NP, 53.
394 Here, it is important to note that, at least when it comes to the “social organism” the passage quoted by Canguilhem is perhaps immune to that critique, since Comte says that revolutions (that is, the equivalent of spontaneous experiments of disease in the organism) were used by him not necessarily to discover or uncover the laws of the normal, but to “confirm and perfect sociological laws”. In this sense, it seems that the first part of the criticism is valid (i.e. the laws of the normal are known a priori to the pathological exaggerations of phenomena). The second part (that the laws are presupposed and discovered through the pathological) seems less clear in Comte’s description of his application of Broussais’ principle to sociology (simply because he says “confirm” and “perfect”, which seems to presuppose that the experiment produced by pathology is not the source of the discovery of laws).
395 NP, 51.
396 NP, 54.
In Canguilhem’s reconstruction of Comte’s thought, he stressed the fact that the realisation of experiments meant introducing change into a designated reality. These changes, however, had to be contained within certain limits compatible with the existence of that phenomenon. But what defines these limits? Is it not the very notion of limit introducing qualitative boundaries in the phenomena it is supposed to examine? If these alleged limits define the organism, are they not delimiting a qualitative space in the sense that within these limits we have a particular thing (a particular species, an organism with a particular nature), and beyond or below them things that are not, strictly speaking, the same? If these limits are what assure the existence of a certain phenomenon, then transgression would mean that the phenomenon would cease to exist – or, at least, it would cease to exist as we know and observe it. Is there not a qualitative difference when it comes to the existence or non-existence of the phenomenon? These questions point to a series of paradoxes that seem to be implied in the quantitative thesis, and they all derive of the notions of limit and limitation of variation employed by Comte.

According to Canguilhem, when it comes to “defining the limits of pathological on experimental disturbances compatible with the existence of organisms, Comte identifies these limits with those of a ‘harmony of distinct influences, those exterior as well as interior’ [Cours de philosophie positive]. It is then in a sort of homeostatic conception of the normal, expressed in this notion of harmony that Comte seems to find what limits the quantitative variations and that to which they should be referred in order to be classified as pathological. The operation here consists in clearly referring a fact (this or that particular variation defined as excessive of deficient) to a value (an image of harmony which would instruct us about how a healthy organism should work, and which would be mobilised to de-value a certain current state of deviation). As Canguilhem explains, in Comte, “the concept of normal or physiological finally clarified by this concept of harmony amounts to a qualitative and polyvalent concept, still more aesthetic and moral than scientific”. Furthermore, the very notions of excess and deficiency – or disturbances or violations of that pre-established harmony – have a qualitative meaning, for excess and lack can only be

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397 NP, 50.
398 NP, 53.
399 NP, 53, One could add that this qualitative idea presupposed in the notion of harmony (and the notion of order underlying it) is as old as philosophy itself. Guthrie, analysing the work of Pythagoras, claims that the idea of harmony has as a “moral and aesthetic corollary that limit is good and the unlimited evil” (The Greek Philosophers, London & New York: Routledge, 37). Guthrie also emphasises the fact that this notion of “harmonia” implies the need of restoring a quantitative relation (see 38-39).
understood in relation to a value, an ideal or an average (taken thus as a norm). Canguilhem writes:

To define the abnormal as too much or too little is to recognise the normative character of the so-called normal state. This normal or physiological state is no longer simply a disposition which can be revealed and explained as fact, but a manifestation of an attachment to some value.\(^{400}\)

The value at stake here is order; in this case it is understood as the harmony which is expressed in and through the regularity and uniformity with which the different organs of an organism function. Its opposite would not be a merely quantitative difference, since certain forms of lack and excess bring about crisis and, therefore, disharmony. This qualitative bias of Comte’s philosophy is especially relevant when it comes to the universal scope and validity he attributes to Broussais’ principle, and therefore its validity in sociological and political realities or, to use his own phrase, to the “collective organism”. His positivist perspective carries this normative and qualitative view into the analysis of society. This analysis of society, which presents itself as objectively and scientifically founded, in reality presupposes an idea of a harmonious normal state and functioning and, therefore, classifies deviations and departures from this established order as pathological modifications. This underlying philosophy of order represents the normal as what is logically and ontologically first. Deviation and disorder in the organism and in society must be confronted by a therapeutic action that consists primarily in normalising: to reconduct disorder to order, deviation to the pre-existing norm; to bring divergent forms of being back to a previous state of normality. One can easily note how the notions of ‘normalising sanction’ and ‘orthopaedia’, which Foucault will formulate in *Discipline and Punish* express this view of the norm.

In Comte’s articulation of the quantitative thesis, therefore, the same sort of technical reactions to disease – namely, *restoration* – should be applied to the crisis of the political organism:

By stating in a general way diseases do not change vital phenomena, Comte is justified in stating that the cure for political crises consists in bringing societies back to their essential and permanent structure, and tolerating progress only within limits of variation of the natural order defined by social statics.\(^{401}\)

\(^{400}\) NP, 57.
\(^{401}\) NP, 64.
Here, the very phrase expressing the idea that the pathological variations depart from the normal state (and the limits which determine its harmony) reveal some of the philosophical presuppositions of this version of the quantitative thesis. To say that the sort of modification introduced by disease – or, ultimately, that disease is, given its epiphenomenal nature – is a departure, means to say that it departs from somewhere, from a point of departure. This point of departure constitutes a sort of static origin from which deviations differ. It is an origin in the sense that it is the theoretical starting point: the normal that one must pre-establish in order to judge variations and modifications as pathological. It is an origin also in the sense that it constitutes the essential condition to which the organism should be reconducted, its nature: it expresses therefore both an initial state, which coincides with the essence of a certain organism, and an end, the point of arrival of any technical (and political) intervention or therapeutic action. As an end, it is also the ideal, the value, which guides and regulates this action.

In other words, this normal state must be known in order for therapy to take place: technique, here, would be only the application of a certain knowledge or science. The cure produced by successful therapy would be a sort of return to an origin (which, as we have remarked, expresses both anteriority to crisis and harmony, essence): it would consist in the action aiming at returning an organism to its normal state. In the case of societies in crisis, cure would be the kind of political action that would bring them back to their “essential and permanent” structure and must therefore be grounded in a scientific knowledge of “social static”.

The homogeneity of normal and pathological and, consequently, the dissolution of the specific place and status of the pathological leads to a conception of the relations between these two terms which Canguilhem characterises as “reversibility”; that is, the idea according to which it would be possible to revert the norms of behaviour and form of life generated in sickness into a previous state of normality, as if the event of crisis and sickness did not presuppose its own temporality, the temporality of a trajectory, in which the organism can only go forward. In the idea of “reversibility” between normal and pathological, health and sickness, we can note a representation of the relation between the living being and the norm, in which the norm is never part of the living process, but a sort of fixed point of reference, from which the living being departs and to which it returns. The norm is not challenged, broken or invalidated in disease. In this sense, the norm has no history, and the

402 NP, 192.
episodes of illness do not intervene in the realm of the norm. In this notion, therefore, we find a clear image of a life without history, and of a normal which has no relationship with the processes in which the organism overcomes barriers, crises or obstacles. There is no space for the emergence of new norms, for transformative innovations of the forms and structures of life (both social and vital). In relation to this image we can begin to grasp the importance and singularity of introducing “History into the domain of Life”.

Lecourt shows, however, that for Canguilhem, the living “can never purely return to its previous state, after having been sick”. From this point of view, living organisms (and, in this sense, also societies) cannot be thought of without considering the history of their crises and the precarious (and always temporary) solutions they are forced to give to each particular situation of trouble. Therefore, being cured must mean something other than a mere return or restoration of old and obsolete norms; rather, for Canguilhem, it consists in this precarious and creative solution.

Let us now return to Comte’s quote, in which we find a view of the normal as a sort of natural order coinciding with an essential structure is based on a view of nature and life as conservative and repetitive phenomena. As Le Blanc points out, “the scientific thesis that identifies normal and pathological masks a norm, which, in its turn, has a social and political origin, and one that finds in a philosophy of order the reasons of its efficacy”. For Le Blanc, this constitutes a “social unthought [impensée] of science”, which presupposes a normative judgement of social origin. Le Blanc points to the ideological character of this underlying philosophy of order. The scientific priority of the normal state expresses a general valorisation of states of order against disorder: “The scientific norm implies a social value”. The therapeutic attempt at restoring the order of good health against the disorder of disease is understood within the perspective of a general primacy of order in relation to disorder.

By identifying the normal and the pathological, the underlying “philosophy of order”, aims at eliminating the latter, both theoretically (as a quantitative epiphenomenal variation) and technically (through a therapeutic return to a normal state of harmony). But this

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403 Lecourt, Georges Canguilhem, 43.
404 We will later return to this point – the fundamental relation between sickness and norm.
405 Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 36.
406 Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 37.
407 Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 48. My translation of this passage is approximative. Le Blanc uses the term sous-tendue.
408 Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 48.
perspective only reduces the pathological to the normal in order to assert the primacy of the latter over the former (not only theoretically but socially and politically): as if the theoretical effacement of its particularity could dispel the power of its eruptions in individual and collective life. In Comte’s passage analysed by Canguilhem, one cannot dissociate the discussion regarding the nature of pathological phenomena from its political and ethical consequences. There is an ideology and a politics which is articulated in the analogy between the vital and the social. As Le Blanc explains:

Le désordre de la maladie est danger individuel contre lequel il faut se prémunir. Le passage des corps individuels au corps collectif d’une société exprime la Même défiance à l’égard des formes de désordre qui nuisent l’équilibre social. La médecine des corps individuels, pour des raisons idéologiques externes, tend à devenir une médecine du corps social, au nom du parallélisme traditionnel entre la santé individuelle et la santé collective.409

The framework of this “philosophy of order”, which dissolves the singularity of the pathological into a mere state of disturbance of the normal, both in the vital and the social organisms, precludes any possibility of the moments of crisis being also moments of creation, differentiation and assertion of new values and structures.410

Le Blanc’s critique of the ideological character of the quantitative thesis can be further developed by a detour through Canguilhem’s later work. In Idéologie et rationalité dans l’histoire des sciences de la vie, Canguilhem returns to the question of the political import of certain forms of discourse that reclaim scientific value and try to provide general scientific grounds for a political program or a particular social configuration. Comte’s operation described in the Normal and the Pathological – namely, “codifying scientific methods” and “establishing a political doctrine scientifically”411 – can be clarified through an analogy with Herbert Spencer’s work, which Canguilhem analyses in Idéologie et rationalité. First, Comte’s operation as it appears in the medicine thesis and Spencer’s in Idéologie et rationalité are analogous in terms of their structure and form. Both take the results of regional sciences and particular scientific experimental investigations and use them as indications or proofs of principles with universal value. But the extension of these conclusions beyond the limited fields in which they appear also means that they no longer

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409 Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 49.
410 Analogously, in BC, Foucault explains that the struggle of medicine against disease becomes a struggle against disorder and, we could add, against “dangerous” forms of social deviation (BC, 40, 44).
411 NP, 64.
can be experimentally refuted or falsified at these regional levels and, therefore, escape the control of particular sciences. Canguilhem explains:

L’extension de la mécanique, de l’embryologie, de la biologie transformiste hors des champs de développement contrôlé de chacune de ces sciences ne peut s’autoriser d’aucune d’entre elles. S’il y a extension à la totalité de l’expérience humaine, et à l’expérience sociale notamment, de conclusions théoriques régionales détachées de leurs prémisses et libérées de leur contexte, à quelle fin cette contagion de scientificité est-elle recherchée ? Cette fin est pratique.412

In Comte’s case, that practical goal was clearly formulated in his description of the cure to political crises. And this leads us to a second aspect of this analogy between Comte and Spencer, which concerns the content of their analyses and propositions. Following Canguilhem’s study, one notes that the practical aim of the detachment of scientific theses from this original regional context is the defence and justification of the “interests of a certain type of society”.413 In this line of thought, another practical aim would be the legitimation of the historical choices of certain values and images of society and social life and its presentation as a sort of accomplished fact, something which is inscribed in nature itself. As if, through scientific discourses generated in different fields and applied to society, one could find the specific norms of social life already accomplished and inscribed in Nature. This would mean to ignore (or reduce to silence) the social conflicts, the diverse points of emergence of social normativity at play that originate different and conflicting norms or, to use Foucault’s words, of the contingencies, chance events and particular choices that define what we are.414

The scientific origins of certain principles are seen as a guarantee of their objectivity and non-social foundation, as if they were beyond conflict and, therefore, closing the debate which characterises both life and society. In this sense, if we return to Comte, we can say that the problem is not necessarily to equate social and vital, society and organism – even though Canguilhem stresses the differences between these two orders of phenomena.415 What is problematic is to think that life itself is a reality deprived of conflict, crises, and transformation or innovation, that is to say, to represent life in a certain way and, through analogy, legitimise a view of society which includes no plurality or conflict of values.416

412 IR, 51-52.
413 IR, 52.
414 FR, 45; EW2, 450.
415 Especially in the addendum to NP, “New Reflections on the Normal and the Pathological”.
416 From this angle, Canguilhem’s perspective – as well as the one I am articulating in this thesis – make recourse to life in a very different way: the idea is precisely not to found a political doctrine
In Spencer, Canguilhem explains, this political and ideological operation appears in his formulation of “a mechanic law of universal progress”, by the evolution of the simple to the complex, by means of differentiation. Through generalising scientific principles coming from nineteenth century biology, Spencer concludes:

Le passage de plus à moins d’homogénéité, de moins a plus individuation, règle universellement la formation du système solaire, de l’organisme animal, des espèces vivantes, de l’homme, de l’humanité incarnée dans la société, des produits de la pensée et de l’activité humaine...

This sort of maximalist hypothesis and generalisation expresses one of the main characters that Canguilhem identified in scientific ideologies, namely that they propose explanatory systems whose objects are “hyperbolic”, in relation to the “norme de scientificité qui lui est appliquée par emprunt”. In this sense, Comte applies to society, without mediation, a principle imported from a certain view of pathology, whereas Spencer uses embryology and Darwinian biology to explain reality (from the formation of the “solar system” to society and human thought). For Spencer, Canguilhem argues, biology has provided a sort of scientific guarantee pour un projet d’ingénieur dans la société industrielle anglaise du XIXe siècle : la légitimation de la libre entreprise, de l’individualisme politique correspondant et de la concurrence. La loi de différenciation finit par le soutien apporté à l’individu contre l’état. Mais, si elle finit explicitement par là, c’est peut-être qu’elle a commencé implicitement par là.

scientifically or in “life itself” as a sort of repetitive and accomplished set of facts and processes, as if life and nature could reveal us particular values and particular forms of living that we should adhere to. My idea is precisely to show how Canguilhem’s concept of normativity can be mobilised to think society and social practices to the extent that it emphasises not allegedly fixed norms (to be found in the science of life, which would be to reify social norms through an analogy with the organism), but rather the process of creation of norms and the conflict of norms and the agents which create them, in different times and spaces. The idea, then, is to show that life is conflict and debate against the environment, and that the responses emerge out of this conflict. The same would be valid for society, except that, in Canguilhem’s work, society does not reach any “solution” which overcomes plurality and conflict. The problem, then, is not the correspondences between society/politics and life, since in modernity governmentalities are already intertwined with vital processes, as Foucault shows in different occasions (especially in WK but also in SMD and other works). We will return to these issues when discussing Foucault’s defence of what I call “alternormativity” in society. In addition to that, in my view, Canguilhem’s critique of “scientific ideologies” has a strong underlying ethical import which could be referred back to his initial adhesion to Alain’s “analyse réflexive”. It is precisely the myth or cult of the given or the accomplished fact that underlies the sort of ideological operation Canguilhem criticises.

According to Canguilhem, Spencer took these principles from the embryology of Karl-Ernst von Baer (Uber Entwickelungsgeschichte der Thiere, 1828), and generalised them, combining them with findings from Darwinian biology, explaining also the evolution of societies (IR, 51).

IR, 51.

IR, 53.

IR, 51.
With Canguilhem’s reflections on scientific ideology in mind we can now return to his analysis of Comte’s version of the quantitative thesis and to that which we referred to as the “philosophy of order” that underpins it. In this sense, in addition to the aesthetical and moral aspect that Canguilhem underlined in Comte’s notion of “harmony”, we could equally stress its fundamentally political aspect. Here, the analogy between vital and social also makes it possible for us to think what therapeutic or technical action would be directed to disease in the case of social and political “pathologies”.

If, indeed, the normal state presupposes a form of regulation which is convergent and even synonymous to “harmony”, then all forms of variation (which transgress the “proper” limits by lack or excess) should be addressed by an action which brings them back to normality, controlling and ultimately effacing them. This very operation of reconducting variations to a state considered as a norm could be called normalisation, here understood as “bringing societies back to their essential and permanent structure”.

As we will see in our reading of Canguilhem’s analysis of illness, this idea that the normal is a pre-established state (“essential” and “permanent”) is one of Canguilhem’s main points of disagreement with the quantitative thesis. It is nevertheless already possible to identify two ways in which Canguilhem’s position differs from it. The first would be referring Canguilhem’s critique back to the inspiration of Alain’s philosophy and the importance of the tradition “analyse réflexive”. We have seen, one of the most important forms in which the young Canguilhem appropriated Alain’s thought consisted in the critique of what we have called the given or accomplished fact. Roth go as far as to claim that Canguilhem was one of the few ‘Alainians’ to have taken this critique of the myth of the accomplished fact [fait brut] to its final consequences, elaborating what he calls a “philosophy of revolt”.

If we revisit Canguilhem’s later analysis of medicine and the historical reconstruction of the quantitative thesis with that in mind, it is possible to note that both its notion of health (and normality) and its conception of pathological variation are based in a series of assumptions of “accomplished facts”. First, the normal established and known a priori corresponds to a projection of values into the phenomena that the quantitative thesis presents as scientific and objective facts – and values that, as Le Blanc has shown, have a

421 Lecourt has shown how Canguilhem addressed the fallacy behind this immediate analogy between the social and the vital, especially focusing on his analysis of the notion of “regulation”. See Lecourt, Georges Canguilhem, 87-88.
422 NP, 64.
social origin. These values are implicit in the view of the normal as a limit of variation compatible with the order and harmony that essentially characterise vital phenomena, the priority of order over disorder in the well-functioning organisms. On the other hand, one of the presuppositions of “Broussais’ principle” is that disease, from a quantitative perspective, would consist in objective facts, which are therefore independent of the experience of the sick person. As we will see, in Canguilhem’s perspective, this is not the case, since not only is disease an experience of facts by the living, but also of values and norms of life, which are experienced as restriction, limitation and hindrance; that is, of negative values and impoverished forms of life from the perspective of the living individual.

In this sense, if we follow Roth’s reflection, Canguilhem cultivates Alain’s legacy by emphasising the experience of values that underlies apparent descriptions of facts. And this leads us to a second important critical point that emerges from Canguilhem’s reading of the way in which the quantitative thesis, and Comte in particular, develop the analogy between the vital and the social. By scientifically establishing the rules and principles valid to the living individual organism and by positing the notions of harmony and order as given facts of life, Comte then looks at society as reproducing the same values (or, in his view, facts). If Comte attempted to scientifically found a political doctrine in a set of facts, Canguilhem maintains Alain’s teaching according to which “social reality is not, in any way, a given or accomplished fact”.424 As Roth explains, Canguilhem shares with Alain the idea according to which “every social fact (...) ultimately rests upon a set of instituted values”.425 As he explains:

> Reality – which the ‘worshippers of the fact’ [adorateurs du fait] like to imagine as something independent of human action – is not therefore a ‘given’, but a ‘result’ (...) of the sedimentation of innumerable choices that humanity had to make throughout its history.426

Therefore, we can conclude that, underlying Canguilhem’s critique of the way in which Comte derives social consequences from an allegedly biological fact, is the idea according to which “nothing in the biological organisation of the human being could ever justify this or that form of [social and] collective life”.427 On the contrary, as Canguilhem will show in the second part of the Normal and the Pathological, the biological organisation of the human being is itself already mediated by history, social choices and contingencies, in such a way that the stabilised dynamics that we call human physiology already expresses

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424 Roth, Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience, 38.
425 Roth, Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience, 39.
426 Roth, Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience, 39.
427 Roth, Georges Canguilhem et l’unité de l’expérience, 39.
collective habits and ways of life that are socially and geographically structured. Life – both individual and collective – presupposes history and choice. In addition, according to Canguilhem, there is always a plurality of social norms in debate and no society embodies a necessary, biological way of life inscribed as a fact in the biology of the living organism.

Finally, one could ask: if Comte’s analogy of vital and social is problematic, why should we consider Canguilhem’s perspective valid? Although Canguilhem posits is a methodological difference between these two domains, the latter is rooted in the former. And why would such a position help us in reading Foucault? The difference is that, instead of looking at an allegedly harmonious structure of the vital (based upon order and conservation) to sustain a political doctrine, Canguilhem extends the plural, polemic and historical aspects that one would usually associate with society and politics to life itself, undermining any possibility of founding a conservative and reactionary political view on the fact “life itself”. Indeed, there is a positive idea of life in Canguilhem’s thought, and this idea has political consequences: but if one is to look at the attributes of life, one would only find the material for a critique of a politics of order and harmony as a given. The adorateurs du fait like to imagine society as something independent of human action. Although this movement between vital and social also exists in Canguilhem, he stresses the differences between the two domains: society is not an organism, because there is always a plurality of coexisting and conflicting social norms, a dimension of internal conflict that is perhaps more than that which an organism could sustain. In society there is always conflicting norms and multiple centres of normativity.

4.1.1. Quantitative Thesis and Medical Information

We have seen how Canguilhem analysed the underlying qualitative social and political conceptions of Comte’s formulation of the quantitative conception of the pathological. Before we analyse Canguilhem’s own views and the notions of norm and normativity that emerge in his qualitative reading of the pathological, we must look at the medical material he analyses and responds to in his engagement with the quantitative thesis, namely the views of Claude Bernard. This is a necessary step in order to grasp the specificity of Canguilhem’s theoretical enterprise, instead of immediately reterritorialising it onto the realm of philosophy.
Bernard’s work is particularly relevant in the economy of Canguilhem’s reconstruction of the quantitative hypothesis because it addresses specific scientific and medical issues, instantiated experimental cases in which the pathological is examined (such as diabetes and animal heat). Like Comte’s, Bernard’s conception of the relation between science and technology is based on the positivist idea of efficacious action as an “application” of scientific knowledge. In this sense, Bernard understands medicine as “the science of diseases” and physiology as the “science of life”. Because for him it is “theory that illuminates and dominates practice”, “rational therapeutics can be sustained only by scientific pathology, and a scientific pathology must be based on physiological science”.428 Here, again, we find the logical primacy of the normal that guides the quantitative hypothesis: it is the science of the normal, its functioning and structures that grounds our scientific understanding of the pathological and, therefore, guides therapeutic action. However, differently from Comte, who used physiological reflections as a sort of universal framework or paradigm to explain disorder in different levels of reality, Bernard is responding to specific theories and hypothesis in psychology and medicine.

First of all, following Canguilhem’s exposition, we can say that Bernard is reacting against what we have previously called the ‘ontological’ conception of disease; or, to use different words, against a conception of disease as “an extra-physiological entity” against which the organism fights. Second, it is against a thesis which “admits a qualitative difference between the mechanisms and products of vital functions of the normal state and those of the pathological state”.429 A very clear illustration of this reaction comes in a long quote from Bernard’s *Leçons sur la chaleur animale*, which Canguilhem reproduces:

> Health and disease are not two essentially different modes as the ancient physicians believed and some practitioners still believe. They should not be made into distinct principles, entities which fight over the organism and make it the theatre of their contest. These are obsolete medical ideas. In reality, between these two modes of being, there are only differences of degree: exaggeration, disproportion, discordance of normal phenomena constitute the diseased state. There is no case where disease would have produced new conditions, a complete change of scene, some new and special products.430

According to Bernard, health and disease must not be understood as two different principles fighting over the organism. As we have seen with Comte, disease never produces

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428 NP, 67.
429 NP, 71.
430 NP, 71.
essentially new phenomena, but simply introduces variation in pre-existing physiological ones. For Bernard, however, when we cannot refer a particular pathological state to a normal and pre-existing phenomenon, this is due to our insufficient knowledge of the normal, rather than to an alleged *sui generis* state created in sickness. As he argues in *Leçons sur le diabète et la glycogenèse animale*: “Every disease has a corresponding normal state of which it is only a disturbed, exaggerated, diminished or obliterated expression. If we are unable to explain all manifestations of disease today, it is because physiology is not yet sufficiently advanced”.431

Before expounding some of Bernard’s presuppositions, let us turn to the experimental examples that he mobilises. First, let us recall Canguilhem’s reading of Bernard’s studies of diabetes. For Bernard, “no problem shows better than diabetes the intimate fusion of physiology and pathology”.432

Indeed, Bernard explains, none of the phenomena which define diabetes represent a new state or a new phenomenon completely different from or unknown to the normal state. Bernard argues that “all of them pre-exist for their intensity which varies in the normal state and the diseased state”.433 Even when a phenomenon seems exclusive to the pathological state, not being apparent in the normal state, Bernard argues that its reality is actually “masked and unnoticed”, that is “that its reality was situated beyond the limits of perception”.434 This is precisely the case of glycosuria (i.e. the “urinary excretion of carbohydrates” or sugar in urine). Differently from other phenomena characterising diabetes, glycosuria is not clearly observable in the normal state. Even though Bernard claims that he does not take presence of sugar in normal urine to be an “absolute truth”, he argues that there are “many, many cases where there are traces” of it.435 If all phenomena defining diabetes must be, as a matter of principle, present in the normal state, so the same must be true for glycosuria. Bernard, cannot provide empirical evidence of this fact. Canguilhem shows how, in the name of theory and in defence of the quantitative thesis, Bernard claims that this lack of evidence does not falsify the theory itself.436 Additionally, Bernard introduced a further hypothesis, namely that the level of glycosuria characterising the

431 NP, 67.
432 NP, 67.
433 NP, 68.
434 NP, 69.
435 NP, 69. Canguilhem shows that this supposition was refuted by experimental information.
436 This is because, as we have seen, when we cannot associate a pathological phenomenon to a normal one which it would intensify or diminish, this is due to an imperfect knowledge of normal.
normal state is infinitesimal and, as such, it escapes perception and observation; it only becomes noticeable when exceeding a certain limit or threshold.\textsuperscript{437}

Although Canguilhem shows how problematic this position is, he highlights the importance of Bernard’s insight according to which the “sugar found in animal organism is a product of the organism” itself, that is, it is in continuity and integrates its physiology and functions. Consistently with this thesis – and given the lack of empirical evidence for glycosuria in the normal state – Bernard provides an alternative explanation, still contained within the framework of the quantitative thesis. He associates the pathological phenomenon of glycosuria with the normal phenomenon of glycemia (i.e. “the presence of glucose in the blood”): if blood normally contains sugar, then urinary sugar is a “product eliminated by the kidneys when the rate of glycemia” – in itself a “normal and constant phenomenon in a healthy organism” – reaches “a certain threshold”.\textsuperscript{438} The relation between glycemia and glycosuria would preserve the idea of a quantitative transition between the normal and the pathological (even when that transition is impossible to perceive); or, as Bernard puts it, “the intimate fusion of physiology and pathology”.\textsuperscript{439}

Bernard’s difficulty to refer glycosuria to a pre-existing normal phenomenon in the non-diabetic organism gave way to criticism by his peers: one of them, Jaccoud, critically addressed this issue, by arguing that the impossibility of providing evidence of a normal phenomenon of which glycosuria would intensify by appealing to glycemia. Jaccoud’s critique consists in a defense of the qualitative hypothesis against Bernard’s lack of evidence for his quantitative formulation. How can a variation or a mere deviation have no corresponding original normal state? Or, to put it differently: how can I classify a certain phenomenon as a variation when I cannot tell what exactly is varying, i.e. what is the substratum of this change? If variation is in intensification, there must be something being intensified. For Jaccoud, there is no way of grounding a pathological fact in a physiological phenomenon if it is impossible to identify this phenomenon in the first place.\textsuperscript{440}

\textsuperscript{437} As Bernard explains: “there is a kind of transient glycosuria which here as everywhere establishes an imperceptible and elusive passage between the physiological and the pathological states” (NP, 69).
\textsuperscript{438} NP, 70.
\textsuperscript{439} NP, 70.
\textsuperscript{440} He explains: “The diabetic state cannot be attributed to the overintensification of a physiological operation which does not exist (...). It is impossible to regard diabetes as the overintensification of a regular operation: it is the expression of an operation completely foreign to normal life. This operation is in itself the essence of disease” (NP, 70).
The second instantiation of the quantitative thesis in Bernard’s research also shows the sort of *qualitative* hypotheses he is struggling against. If in the case of diabetes Bernard seeks to refute the thesis of a qualitative discontinuity between normal and pathological, in the case of animal heat and his polemic against Lussana and Ambrossoli, we can note a different operation, which will help us clarifying another aspect of Canguilhem’s thought, namely the singularity of vital phenomena in nature.

If we are to understand the significance of Bernard’s assertion of continuity between normal and pathological phenomena, we must “bear in mind that the thesis towards which Bernard’s critical demonstrations are directed is one which admits a qualitative difference between the mechanisms and products of the vital functions of the normal state and those of the pathological state”. And we could add to this another qualitative difference that would express a form of *vitalism*: the fundamental difference between *vital* phenomena and other phenomena from the mere chemical, physical or inorganic nature.

According to Canguilhem, Lussana and Ambrossoli repeated one of Bernard’s experiments and differentiated two forms of animal heat: one that was morbid (“engendered by the vasodilation of the effected organs”) and another that was physiological (originated by “combustion of food”). In his attempt at refuting the Italian authors, Bernard claimed that “physico-chemical manifestations do not change in nature, whether they take place inside or outside the organism, in a healthy or diseased state”. Challenging Lussana and Ambrosoli, then, Bernard argues that there is only one kind of “calorific agent; whether produced in a furnace or in an organism it is none the less the same”. Thus, for Bernard, the idea of a continuity between the normal and the pathological is linked to a broader claim stating the “continuity between life and death, organic and inorganic matter”. In Canguilhem’s example: “There cannot be physical heat and animal heat, still less morbid heat and physiological heat. Morbid heat and physiological heat differ only in degree, not in their nature”.

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441 I.e. the relation between glycemia and glycosuria and the imperceptible transition between normal and pathological.
442 NP, 71.
443 “On the cutting of the sympathetic nerve and its effects” (NP, 72).
444 NP, 72.
445 Bernard *apud* NP, 72.
446 NP, 72.
447 NP, 72.
448 NP, 72.
In order to dissolve any trace of qualitative difference between health and sickness, normal and pathological, Bernard was also compelled to attack the vitalist idea of a struggle between life and death, and even that of the difference between inanimate and living matter. Bernard’s presupposition is that there cannot be ‘two chemistries’: both what happens in the laboratory and in the living being follow exactly the same laws. If all living beings, as parts of nature, are “tributaries of the general laws of nature”, and therefore there is no qualitative difference separating the phenomena of life from other physico-chemical phenomena, how could one say that there is anything as a further qualitative difference, namely one within the realm of life? How could we speak of phenomena that not only are qualitatively different from all that physics and chemistry describes, and how to say that in a specific domain, there are still two qualitatively different modes of life, the normal and the pathological?

Canguilhem stresses that Bernard’s recognition of a fundamental continuity of normal and pathological phenomena and of biological and the more general physico-chemical phenomena, does not mean ignoring the “originality” of vital and pathological phenomena. Thus, according to Bernard “no chemical phenomenon exists inside that body as it does outside of it”. Even though the chemical results may be the same, he believes that the “expression is particular, the mechanism is special” and the “agent specific”.

Canguilhem’s critique of Bernard develops the latter’s own (one could say inconsistent) acceptance of the relative ‘originality’ of vital phenomena – since Bernard tried to ground the continuity of normal and pathological on the continuity of organic and inorganic matter, life and death. Bernard admits that the vital phenomena “are placed under the direct influence of physico-chemical conditions”. These conditions, however, cannot organise, harmonise phenomena “in the order and succession which they assume particularly in living things”. Once Bernard admits this distinction, why not, then, admit that although there is only one physiology, pathological phenomena should be recognised in their relative originality? Why not consider their ‘expression particular’ and their ‘mechanisms special’? In Canguilhem’s words: “Why assert unreservedly the identity of

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449 “The continuity of phenomena, their imperceptible gradation and harmony must be recognised everywhere” (NP, 72).
450 NP, 74.
451 NP, 74.
452 NP, 74.
disease and health when one does not do so for life and death, when one intends to use the relation between the latter as a model for that between the former?\textsuperscript{453}

Bernard’s work provided a specific instantiation of the quantitative thesis mobilising physiological concepts, experiences and methods. He tried to provide concrete examples of the idea that “disease is the exaggerated or diminished expression of a normal function”.\textsuperscript{454} Nevertheless, Canguilhem claims, Bernard’s analyses are not free from the same sort of ambiguity of those of Comte and Broussais. First of all, because it preserves a qualitative content in the way it conceives the divergences and deviations from the normal. As Canguilhem shows, this ambiguity appears in Bernard’s use of the term “exaggeration”: in some occurrences, it defines the “disturbance of a normal mechanism in terms of a quantitative variation”; in others, it expresses a “disproportion, discordance of the normal phenomena”.\textsuperscript{455}

The different versions of the quantitative thesis, by undermining the reality of the pathological, also undermine the value of the experience from which it emerges, which is the experience of a living being who experiences that something has changed in the way it positions itself and acts in the world. This negative experience is said to have no positive reality: the technical and normative effort to overcome it, in the quantitative perspective becomes its theoretical denial. In different versions of the quantitative thesis, we note a series of attempts to delegitimise the way the living experiences the state of sickness as a state characterised by a negative value: “Is the difference in value, which the living being establishes between its normal life and its pathological life, and illusory appearance that the scientist has the legitimate obligation to deny?”.\textsuperscript{456} Why not recognise that health for the living being functions as a ‘norm’, a concept that presupposes the negative value experienced in sickness and the urge to correct, to change, a reality when it is thus experienced? How can one deny the singularity of the experience of suffering and pain? Why not admit that, even if something takes place within the framework of physiological limits (and ultimately physical and chemical laws), it is not indifferent for the living being? Health and sickness can be facts in the realm of physics and biochemistry and, nevertheless, we differentiate them as fundamentally opposite realities. Canguilhem thinks their difference cannot be explained at the level of their conditions of possibility (i.e. as facts of chemistry and physics). If Braunstein,
Lecourt and Roth are right to situate the philosophical presuppositions in a philosophy of value and evaluation against the accomplished realm of facts, we can say that health and sickness are experiences of different (and antinomic) values associated to our forms of living, and not mere facts. It is only in the domain of evaluation that we say of our own life that it is healthy or sick.

It is with the critique of Bernard that Canguilhem begins to expose his own positive philosophical understanding of health and sickness. He does this by first acknowledging that the quantitative hypothesis could hold some validity when referring disease only to the affected mechanisms, that is: "as long as the pathological phenomenon is limited to some symptom, leaving aside its clinical context." It is in the clinical context that a series of experiences emerge to the patient, and for her, these experiences go beyond the particular functional mechanisms affected. For the patient, the symptoms of a disease can be experienced as a new quality. So, it is the doctor who must reconduct these lived, experienced symptomatic effects back to partial functional mechanisms. But it is still the ‘critical’ evaluation of the patient that opens the path of both enquiry and technical action for the doctor. In the clinical and therapeutic context, understanding this presence of pathology in functional mechanisms is tied to the possibility of acting upon these mechanisms so as to overcome this ‘critical’ state. Therefore, we could say that the clinical context is a critical context.

From the physician’s viewpoint, the experience of disease, the patient’s awareness that something is wrong must be seen as a sort of imperfect formulation of a physiological condition that must be retranslated by the doctor in terms of the organs and their functions. Thus, Canguilhem identifies the divergence between two perspectives. The first is that of the physiologist and the physician, which is a scientific attempt to bracket the experience of suffering, by localising disease in a particular functional mechanism – unknown to the sick person who suffers. The second is the pathological experience of the patient, which is the experience of an individual, encompassing the totality of her behaviour and relation to her environment. Medicine tries to efface this holistic experience, which is for medicine itself paradoxically foundational: "The physician has a tendency to forget that it is the patients who call him. The physiologist has a tendency to forget that a clinical and therapeutic

\[457\] NP, 84.
medicine (...) preceded physiology".\textsuperscript{458} \textsuperscript{459} Medicine can only emerge as a normative response to the appel of the sick person who ultimately risks to lose her life.\textsuperscript{460}

Modern medicine and physiology – following the positivist presuppositions of their formation – assert that scientific knowledge must precede and found clinical practice and therefore that physiology must provide the complete framework for understanding the pathological. Moreover, it is the silencing and dismissal (or, at least, the forgetting) of the imprecise impressions and vague experiences of sick people that seems to orient positions such as the quantitative thesis in its attempt to efface the originality and the singularity of pathological phenomena. Scientific medicine and physiology seek to efface the normative calling (appel) of the suffering living human being that first brought them to life in the experience of negative values, that is, of a life that experiences itself negatively. Even if at the level of the natural process itself one could potentially look at these two different experiences as two different perspectives regarding a same reality (variations of existing physico-chemical phenomena), and even if we make no distinctions regarding the specific functional mechanism affected, we still cry for help when in pain. That is to say, we nevertheless still try to remove or overcome the obstacles that impose themselves upon our trajectories, and preventing us from unfolding and developing our capacities. Even considering these two cases – of a complete blindness regarding the physiological causes explaining our pain and of, ultimately, the indifference of pain itself at the level of physics and chemistry – we still polemically engage and debate with what happens to us; in a word, we evaluate. Biological facts have, therefore, an existential density for the being in the face of possible death.

Lecourt characterised these two perspectives as, respectively, the logic of the physician ("la logique des médecins") and the disease of the sick person ("la maladie du malade").\textsuperscript{461} Canguilhem’s attempt in the \textit{Normal and the Pathological} is to shift perspectives – to pass from the “scientific dogma” of Broussais, Comte and Bernard to a qualitative idea stemming from the “drama” that sickness constitutes in the history of a living

\textsuperscript{458} NP, 206 [139]: “le médecin a tendance à oublier que ce sont les maladies qui font appel au médecin. Le physiologiste a tendance à oublier qu’une médecine clinique et thérapeutique (...) a précédé la physiologie”.

\textsuperscript{459} NP, 139.

\textsuperscript{460} It is interesting to note that this argument can be found in Plato (Republic, Book VI, 489b-d), where it is mobilised to justify a certain epistemic foundation of political power and government: the ship crew needs the pilot and it is the sick person that looks for the doctor: “the true natural order is for the sick man (...) to wait on the doctor”.

\textsuperscript{461} Lecourt, Georges Canguilhem, 38.
individual – a drama which can culminate with one’s tragic encounter with death. As Lecourt puts it, Canguilhem seeks to systematically deconstruct “la logique des Médecins qui ont encouragé et rationalisé l’oubli de la ‘maladie du malade’”.\(^{462}\)

Therefore, even a pathology based on physiological science and understood as the study of the “mechanisms of disease” receives “from clinical practice” its “notion of disease, whose origin must be sought in the experience men have in their relations with the whole of their environment”.\(^{463}\) In this sense, disease is first apprehended in suffering by an individual who experiences herself as a totality (and not as a kidney, pancreas or a specific functional mechanism). It is the whole individual who experiences her own precarity. It is only through abstraction that one can break up disease into symptoms and consider these symptoms in relation to functional mechanisms.\(^{464}\)

Paradoxically, the only way science can have access to symptoms is through a practice in which the physician interacts with “complete and concrete individuals and not with organs and their functions”.\(^{465}\) Canguilhem, in his critique of the quantitative thesis, wants to shift focus to that Le Blanc designated “the subjectivity of the sick [person]”: “La subjectivité du malade est désormais le point de référence, en deçà de la polysémie des définitions externes, de toute analyse du vivant lié à sa possible destruction”.\(^{466}\)

It is as a change in behaviour and as an event in an individual’s trajectory or life story that disease first appears.\(^{467}\) As Canguilhem will later describe through René Leriche’s definition: it is the rupture or break with a state of unawareness in which “life is lived in the silence of the organs”\(^{468}\) that the event of disease takes place. Such an event removes the subject from “this state of unawareness” where she is one with her body. Awareness, which will open up the path both for therapy and scientific enquiry on causes and mechanisms, emerges from this experience of negativity: “a feeling of limits, threats and obstacles for health”.\(^{469}\) It is the experience of a rupture in an individual’s unfolding in the world, her performances, actions and dispositions that characterises the experience of sickness: it is the

\(^{462}\) Lecourt, Georges Canguilhem, 38.
\(^{463}\) NP, 88.
\(^{464}\) NP, 88.
\(^{465}\) NP, 88.
\(^{466}\) Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 29.
\(^{467}\) “What is a symptom without context or background? What is a complication separated from what it complicates? When an isolated symptom or functional mechanism is termed pathological, one forgets that what makes them so is their inner relation in the individual totality of individual behaviour” (NP, 88).
\(^{468}\) NP, 91.
\(^{469}\) NP, 91.
feeling of restriction of possibilities, or no longer being able to deploy one’s forces, one’s body and energy in the same way. Disease could also be characterised as the feeling that one should restrict one’s sphere of activity to stagnated and “repulsive” norms. Finally, it is the experience of the organisation of a different way of life that we call disease.

It is developing this idea of disease as “another life” and a different “way of life” from the perspective of a concrete biological individual that Canguilhem concludes his critical analysis of the quantitative thesis. The “feeling of the sick man” and his experience of sickness suggests that which “contemporary pathology is only beginning to see”, namely that “the pathological state is not a simple varied extension of the physiological state but something else entirely”.

4.2. “Pars construens”: The Qualitative Thesis

We have seen how Canguilhem has critically reconstructed a history of the quantitative thesis regarding the relation between disease and health, revealing its paradoxes and ambiguities. We have seen that the quantitative thesis in Broussais, Comte and Bernard had an implicit qualitative bias, while positing certain norms and establishing certain states and attributes as defining the normal. In the quantitative perspective, the normal state and its norms were already established a priori: in Comte’s case, it was linked to a certain idea of harmony and the order which had to be preserved in such a way that any variation had to be kept within the limits proper to the existence of a given phenomenon. Disease was a state of relative disorder and dis-harmony caused by variation (and the reader will remember that this sort of prefix, according to Canguilhem, designated precisely a sort of qualitative perception about the change in a system’s state). The way in which it related to the norm was through a deviation that had to be reconducted to the norm. We found in this idea the principle for a notion of normalisation, which saw therapy (in society and in the individual) as an intervention concerned with restoring a normal state, as if life did not learn anything through disease (nor societies through its crises), as if disease were not a milestone, a sort of irreversible event in relation to which there would be ‘no way back’.

By failing to understand how disease and norm are related – that is, by failing to understand that disease is not the absence of norm or the mere deviation or departure of the living being from a particular fixed norm, but rather a life which is lived according to

470 NP, 89.
different norms – the quantitative thesis maintained a sort of reversibility between normal and pathological. It is this notion of continuity and reversibility which grounds an idea of the cure as return or restoration. Thus, the quantitative thesis ignored that which is one of Canguilhem’s main concerns in the Normal and the Pathological: the historical aspect that characterise all living forms (both collectively as species or, in the case of the human being as societies, and individually, since every life is constituted by irreversible events which are keys to understand the norms which emerge as responses to each of these events, especially situations of crisis).

Rather than emphasising the variations of functional mechanisms and particular organs, Canguilhem invites us to look at the biological individual as a totality, as a whole, in order to understand the anguish created by disease. We can note, then, a transition in Canguilhem’s argument from what we could call a ‘pars destruens’ to a ‘pars construens’ (which beings with the recovery of the ‘maladie du malade’).

In order to introduce this ‘pars construens’ Canguilhem explores the views of Réné Leriche, for whom it is the experience of disease as negativity that grounds a qualitative idea of health and, therefore, a radical distinction between forms of life that, for the living being, are in opposition. As we have seen, Leriche’s definition of health is that of a life that is “lived in the silence of the organs”.\textsuperscript{471} Disease, on the other hand, is “what irritates men in the normal course of their lives and work and, above all, what makes them suffer”.\textsuperscript{472} As I have stressed, in Canguilhem’s view, it is in the experience of limitations, threats, obstacles and suffering that one becomes aware of one’s body. To phrase it differently: it is in the interruption of the normal course and unfolding of our life, our activities and performances, that the occasion for awareness emerges and the body breaks its silence. In this sense, health is a state which implies a positive value; but it is through the negativity of disease, which Leriche describes as “irritation” – and which Canguilhem refers to as a threat, a limitation, an obstacle – that we become aware of it. That is to say that this awareness of health emerges from the experience of opposition rather than the objective measurement of deprivation. As Canguilhem claims, the notion of the normal in Leriche’s conception depends fundamentally on the possibility of a violation of an existing norm. Therefore, disease is not defined as a mere quantitative variation of physiological mechanisms (a state more or less

\textsuperscript{471} NP, 91.  
\textsuperscript{472} NP, 91.
distanced from a norm), but a truly abnormal state, which Leriche defines as “a new physiology where many things, turned into a new key, have unusual resonance”.

As Canguilhem explains this definition of disease is that of a negative awareness, a suffering conscience, which is to say, it is the description of an experience of the living individual. In this sense, Canguilhem argues, “the pathological implies pathos, the direct and concrete feeling of suffering and impotence, the feeling of a life gone wrong”. This feeling appears in the attention to the notion of pain: the event of pain leads the living individual to an experience of qualitatively distinct states. As an accident interrupting the trajectory of the living, pain is an “authentically abnormal state”. The individual’s experience of life revealed in pain is what Canguilhem calls the fundamental “polarity” of vital values. It is a new physiological order, condition and state that is perceived and experienced as negative. One of the important conclusions that Canguilhem formulates when articulating the implications of Leriche’s ideas is precisely the presence of negative values among the vital values. This means that the living individual does not experience the states of sickness indifferently – rather, it is precisely because these states are experienced as negative that we can differentiate disease and health.

Additionally, Leriche’s theory also presupposes a view of the relation between technique and knowledge (and between therapy and physiological science) which differs from the one we referred to as the ‘positivist idea’. Comte and Bernard expressed the latter by fundamentally believing that it is necessary to know in order to act, which amounts to saying that “a technology must be the application of a science”. It is physiological knowledge that must shed light upon pathology and thus establish therapeutics. For Leriche, however, since he emphasises the concrete experiences of the individual’s suffering, it is the opposite that is true: we progress from a medical and surgical technology – which is to say, from therapeutic need and clinical experience – to physiological knowledge.

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473 NP, 97.
474 However, as Canguilhem explains, for Leriche the “silence of the organs does not equal to the absence of disease” for “there are functional lesions and perturbations that remain imperceptible to those whose life they endanger” (NP, 92). In this sense Leriche is part of the tendency to assert the “invalidity of the sick man’s judgment concerning his own sickness” (NP, 91). Canguilhem adds, “the disease that never existed in man’s consciousness begins to exist in the physician’s science” (NP, 91). For this very reason, we must differentiate Canguilhem from Leriche: the former is using the latter’s definition of health to propose a return to the maladie du malade.
475 NP, 137.
476 NP, 96.
477 NP, 104.
478 NP, 99.
In Canguilhem’s view, technique is a vital need that responds to life’s struggle against disease, destruction and death. It acts upon life so as to institute new conditions and to address negativity. More specifically, technique is, for Canguilhem, a normative response of life to the experience of its own precariousness, rather than a sort of corollary of knowledge, of a knowledge that would naturally unfold in action. On the contrary, knowledge and conceptualisation emerge from the failures [échecs] and errors of technical action and creation. Human technique is, in this sense, exploratory and experimental: it is the expression of a search of means and effects, extending the vital impulse though constant trial and error. Technique is vital and normative in the Canguilhemian sense, because it expresses the struggle against limiting conditions and the temerity of life’s gambling against death. A technique emerges from the urgency of addressing a negative state, and it is therefore and assertion of value and the proposition of a norm of action, of a way of doing.

Here we find an expression of one of the key enterprises Canguilhem undertakes in the Normal and the Pathological, namely: that of defending and advocating for the value and importance of the practical and technical adventure in the formation of knowledge. It is in the risks and failures which take place in practical and empirical trials that knowledge finds one of its main driving forces. Canguilhem thinks, as is clear in his text on “Descartes et la technique”, that:

La science procède de la technique non pas en ceci que le vrai serait une codification de l’utile, un enregistrement du succès, mais au contraire en ceci que l’embarras technique, l’insuccès et l’échec invitent l’esprit à s’interroger sur ces résistances rencontrées par l’art humain, à concevoir l’obstacle comme objet indépendant des désirs humains, et à rechercher une connaissance vraie.

It is through the creative initiative of technique, and especially through the resistances it encounters, that knowledge can be constituted. Rather than simply and mechanically applying an already accomplished knowledge Canguilhem sees in technique a response to vital situations that precede the formation of corpus of knowledge. As Braunstein explains, “for Canguilhem, far from being a mere application of science, technique introduces novelty and the unexpected [inattendu]”. Technical action (of which

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479 “De l’échec naît la conscience de l’ignorance et de cette conscience la saisie de l’illusion comme méconnaissance (...). En revanche, identifiant la connaissance à ses progrès par rectification des illusions premières indispensables à l’action, il scrute les conditions dans lesquelles se forment ces illusions” (Lecourt, Georges Canguilhem, 76-77).
480 G1, 496-497. See Lecourt, Georges Canguilhem, 67.
therapy and medicine themselves are exemplary instantiations)\textsuperscript{482} and its proposition of new solutions to our experience of obstacles, troubles and limitations can be seen as a paradigmatic case of normative activity. One can only understand technical creation by relating it to the polarity of experience, that is to say, to the debate with the world and the negative values we experience in it. Knowledge emerges in our responses to the threats of the environment and in our failures to face them in technical experimentation.

Canguilhem’s philosophy of technical adventure is related to at least two philosophical sources. For Braunstein, Canguilhem’s reflections on technique are in situated in relation to Alain’s works on ‘technical thought’ [pensée technicienne qui essaie avec les mains] and to Bergon’s reflection on the homo faber.\textsuperscript{483} In his first writings, Canguilhem was hostile to Bergson.\textsuperscript{484} However, this position changes throughout the years.\textsuperscript{485} Braunstein shows that Canguilhem admired Bergson’s reflections on the relation between machine and life, viewing Bergsonism as a “biological philosophy of machinisme, which treated machines as organs of life and laid the grounds for a general organology”.\textsuperscript{486} What Canguilhem assimilates from Bergson is, Braunstein contends, the view according to which the fabrication of tools is a prolongation of the élan vital, that is to say that technique is a

\textsuperscript{482} We can recall Canguilhem’s definition: “Medicine seemed to us and still seems to us like a technique or art at the crossroads of several sciences, rather than, strictly speaking, like a science” (NP, 34 [8]).

\textsuperscript{483} Braunstein, “Canguilhem avant Canguilhem”, 18. This concept reappears in the Normal and the Pathological: “The physiological constant is the expression of a physiological optimum in given conditions among which we must bear in mind those which the living being in general, and homo faber in particular, give themselves” (NP, 171).

\textsuperscript{484} Roth reads this opposition in Kantian terms, as a difference of emphasis in the reading of the Introduction to Transcendental Logic, between two poles (intuition and concept): on the one hand, Alain and the tradition analyse réflexive and the emphasis on the active and operative activity of synthesis of the esprit (the spontaneity of the understanding). On the other, Bergson, Roth argues, emphasises our capacity of being affected, undertaking the enterprise of restoring the importance of sensibility. This, for Alain, meant resolving reflexivity in receptivity, “short-circuiting understanding” (Georges Canguilem et l’unité de l’expérience, 70). Alain saw in Bergson a trace of the resignation to the fait accompli he was so critical of. As Roth spells out, Alain denounces in Bergsonism the ethical and political implications of a philosophy entirely turned to receptivity (70). As he explains: “Tel qu’Alain l’interprète, la méthode de Bergson consiste en effet à se détourner de l’entendement et de ses concepts, pour se laisser porter par le flux de la durée, réalité qualitative à laquelle nous accèderions via l’intuition” (66). In an interview with Bing and Braunstein, these authors comment: “Avant la guerre, il y a eu un moment où, à travers le pamphlet de Politzer, il semble que toute la jeunesse cultivée de l’époque ait été hostile à Bergson, et vous-même, je crois, avez fait un compte-rendu assez élogieux du livre de Politzer”, to which Canguilhem replies : “Oui, effectivement, Politzer (rires)”. Bing & Braunstein, “Entretien avec Georges Canguilhem”, in Bing; Braunstein; Roudinesco, Actualité de Georges Canguilhem, 129. See Canguilhem, “La fin d’une parade philosophique: le bergsonisme”, CE1, 221-228.

\textsuperscript{485} Bing & Braunstein, “Entretien avec Georges Canguilhem”,129.

\textsuperscript{486} Braunstein, “Canguilhem avant Canguilhem”, 18.
function of the living being, and cannot be separated from life.\footnote{487} To put it in Canguilhemian terms, the history of technique, artefacts and technical solutions provides us with documents of our normative activity, a history or trajectory of our polemical engagement with the world and ourselves and our effort to change both. The history of techniques is part of the history of life’s struggle against death.\footnote{488}

In the \textit{Normal and the Pathological}, this thesis acquires a very particular formulation, which will prepare the terrain for our discussion of vital norms. Knowledge (physiology) not only is the response to the errors and problems encountered in technical action (therapy), as the line of argument found in “Descartes et la technique” suggests. It is therapy itself that is rooted in the experience of the living as a response to the experience of the negative values of disease. As Leriche explains in his 1936 article in the \textit{Encyclopédie Française}, this negative state of disease represents, for the living a new physiological order and, as we have stressed, “a new way of life". Therapy is an attempt of human beings to come to terms with this condition. This means that, differently from Comte, Leriche did not conceive of therapy as an effort to return to nor as a restoration of a pre-established norm, but as a sort of debate with one’s new condition. We could say that it is the question of ‘how to live’ that one poses in relating to one’s new condition, and that therapy must address: what is this new way of being in the world? How to live with it? In Leriche’s words, disease is a “new state to which therapy must aim to adapt the sick man”.\footnote{489} As we will see, adaptation to the way of life constituted by disease is not the only option for the living being.

In the experience of the limitations disease, we find the vital root of both a technology which addresses pain and suffering, while attempting to develop a different form of relation between the sick person and her disease, and knowledge itself.\footnote{490} Canguilhem explains this relation between knowledge and the experience of sickness through a reference to the Aristotelian θαυμάζειν \textit{[thaumázein]}, the awe or wonder provoked on us by the world

\footnote{487} “Les outils sont des organes artificiels qui nous servent dans cette exploitation de la matière qu’exige la vie” (Braunstein, “Canguilhem avant Canguilhem”, 18).
\footnote{488} In addition to Alain and Bergson, Lecourt underlines the importance of Nietzsche, and especially a reading of the Birth of Tragedy for Canguilhem’s conceptualisation of technique (See Lecourt, \textit{Georges Canguilhem}, 67-68).
\footnote{489} NP, 96
\footnote{490} Thus, Canguilhem finds in Leriche that which is also the “theory of a technology”, according to which the latter is not a “docile servant carrying out intangible orders” but acts as an “advisor or animator, directing attention to the concrete problems and orienting research in the direction of obstacles without presuming anything in advance of the theoretical solutions which will arise”. It is important to stress, in this context, Canguilhem’s defence of “empiricism” as the “philosophy of intellectual adventure” (NP, 105). He claims that “to deny technology a value all its own of the knowledge it succeeds in incorporating is to render unintelligible the irregular progress of knowledge”.

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and its phenomena which leads us to philosophical speculation.\textsuperscript{491} In the case of the pathological, if any knowledge is to become possible, the living being must lose its “organic innocence”.\textsuperscript{492} It is this sort of \textit{vital wonder} produced by disease and the anguish it creates that is the starting point for physiology: “Physiology is like all science, which, as Aristotle says, proceeds from wonder. But the truly vital wonder is the anguish created by disease”.\textsuperscript{493}

This state of wonder is related to the fact that disease reveals normal functions to us “at the precise moment when it deprives us of their exercise”.\textsuperscript{494} Both this interruption and the “new way of life” that we experience through and after it, “renew the area to be explored”, opening up a terrain for physiological investigation. As Foucault will explain in “Life, Experience and Science”, knowledge and concept ate not, for Canguilhem, radically opposed to life (or something that weakens or negates life).\textsuperscript{495} On the contrary, they are a response to life’s \textit{échecs} and errors, in the same way that – as we will see – our norms and forms of life are responses to our debate with the environment and that which we learn through the negative experience of disease. Canguilhem synthesises this process in a remarkably vitalistic statement: “Disease is the source of speculative attention which life attaches to life by means of man”.\textsuperscript{496}

Canguilhem finds in Leriche a conception of physiology that is very different from Comte’s idea according to which, as we have seen, theoretical biology and physiology would be fully independent from medicine and therapeutics. Leriche, by contrast, “thinks that physiology is the collection of solutions to problems posed by sick men through their illnesses”.\textsuperscript{497} What is more, in this conception Canguilhem finds a fundamental insight that he will make his own throughout the rest of his medicine thesis, namely the one according to which physiology is not a given or accomplished fact but an inventory of solutions life gives to certain problems, which is to say, new, innovative ways in which living organisms respond to limitations and obstacles. As he explains “at the very moment there lie within us many

\textsuperscript{491} See Aristotle, \textit{Metaphysics}, Book A (I), Chapter 2, 982b10-20: “For it is owing to their \textit{wonder} that men both now begin and at first began to philosophise; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the genesis of the universe” (Ross’ translation).

\textsuperscript{492} “It must be lost, like all innocence so that knowledge may be possible” (NP, 101).

\textsuperscript{493} NP, 101.

\textsuperscript{494} NP, 101. “It is through the changes which the disease of an organ and sometimes the complete suspension of its activity transmit to its functions that we learn the organ’s use and importance” (NP, 107)

\textsuperscript{495} EW2, 475.

\textsuperscript{496} NP, 101.

\textsuperscript{497} NP, 100.
more physiological possibilities than physiology would tell us about. But it takes disease to reveal them to us”.

This striking qualitative idea of the state of disease and its way to inaugurate, reveal or unfold physiological possibilities reappears in Canguilhem’s conclusion of the thesis, regarding the status of physiology. As he explains, physiology is not the science of “the laws and constants of normal life”. Through the experience of the pathological, life assimilates new information, reacts to crisis, integrates situational outcomes to its own structure, that is to say – life differs from itself. In this sense, physiology can only be “the science of stabilised modes of life”. It cannot be the science of life itself, because life is characterised by its plasticity, by its capacity to vary, to give new solutions to problems, to be other than itself. Physiology studies a life that, Canguilhem claims, is “histological” but it is also, and to the same extent “historical”. Physiology is than defined as the “science of stabilised modes of life”, that is, it studies an object “whose identity is that of habit rather than that of nature”. Or, to use a Nietzschean phrase, there is no fact about the nature of living forms which is not already a “second nature”, a product of activity, habit and history. The norms and constants found in the structure and function of living forms are a result of an itinerary which culminated with the instauration of these norms, and their crystallisation and sedimentation through habit, in particular circumstances of interaction and environment. Therefore, for Canguilhem, physiology can only study these crystallised forms of being, which are but the outcome, the result and the trace of a normative activity, by means of which life actively responds to the challenges of the environment by creating different norms and ways of living. In its confrontation with disease and other negative values, life acts by re-positioning itself in the environment, in relation to its surroundings and to others, and this reconfiguration is precisely the establishment of a new mode of life, which also means the institution of its own environment. This active debate of life with the world is precisely what Canguilhem calls “vital normativity”.

498 NP, 100.
499 NP, 203.
500 NP, 204.
501 NP, 203.
502 NP, 206.
Chapter 5

Vital Normativity

Canguilhem concludes his critical analysis of the positivist and quantitative thesis regarding the nature of the pathological and its relations to the normal with the statement that it is “illegitimate to maintain that the pathological state is really and simply a greater or lesser variation of the physiological state”. On the contrary, the physiological state has quality and value for the living human being. And even the quantitative thesis paradoxically presupposed this value in the form of a norm which served to evaluate deviances or, to use different words, as a sort of *a priori* scale with which to observe, interpret and judge phenomena. Health as a qualitatively different state with preferable norms was also clear in the positivistic conception of therapy which viewed cure as a successful therapeutic action promoting the *return* to a desired or desirable ‘lost’ state. For Canguilhem, this qualitative judgement which characterises the experience of sickness (and even of a ‘normal’ state to which a return is seen as desirable) is at the very basis of medicine as a set of therapeutic techniques and as an “art of life”:

> We think that medicine exists as the art of life because the living human being himself calls certain dreaded states or behaviours pathological (hence requiring avoidance or correction) relative to the dynamic polarity of life, in the form of a negative value.

As Canguilhem suggests, the notion of disease groups a whole series of facts and states designated and experienced as *negative*. From this perspective, he sees life as an activity of opposition to inertia and indifference and as a dynamic of “evolution, variation of forms, invention of behaviours”. Differently from other natural phenomena, life always differentiates and evaluates objects, situations and conditions of its experience. The forms it adopts are an expression or an embodiment of these evaluations.

Perhaps we could more clearly understand this notion of the vital and as polarised activity of selection and differentiation if we compare it to other domains of phenomena, for which events are, in effect, indifferent. Canguilhem’s example comes from the work of Xavier Bichat. The latter, in his *Anatomie générale appliquée à la physiologie et à la médecine*,

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504 NP, 110.
505 NP, 126.
506 NP, 236.
507 NP, 203.
reflects on the notion of pathology and its specificity. For Bichat, one could not speak of a physical, chemical or mechanical pathology, but only of a biological one. As he argues:

There are two things in the phenomena of life: (1) the state of health; (2) the state of disease, and from these two, distinct sciences derive: physiology, which concerns itself with the phenomena of the first state, pathology with those of the second. The history of phenomena in which vital forces have their natural form leads us (…) to the history of phenomena where these forces are changed. Now, in the physical sciences only the first history exists, never the second. Physiology is to the movement of living bodies what astronomy, dynamics, hydraulics, etc are to inert ones: these last have no science at all which corresponds to the first.\textsuperscript{508}

Bichat’s argument shows that there is nothing in the realm of physical sciences that would presuppose the evaluative distinction with which the living relates to its world and the states it experiences. For instance, we cannot say that an earthquake is pathological as a geophysical phenomenon; it is only in the encounter between the earthquake and living forms, that it acquires its negative value: it is experienced within the polarised references of the living beings which it threatens.\textsuperscript{509}

As we have seen, from the perspective of the laws of nature, it is indifferent if this or that mechanical chain of causes, if this chemical reaction, and so on, provoke a reaction mediated by polar evaluation. The natural event is only disastrous from the perspective of the precarious life it threatens. Even if physiology and medicine have their origin in pathos, when investigating the causes of that dysfunction, they attempt to bracket the experience

\textsuperscript{508} NP, 127-128.

\textsuperscript{509} This is why there is not a ‘pathological’ equivalent to hydraulics, mechanics, etc. In the example of the earthquake, one can note the neutrality and necessity with which things take place in nature and according to the laws of nature or, to put it differently, from the perspective of Nature itself. From this viewpoint, the earthquake is normal. There is pathology only where there is evaluative and axiological experience. It is only in the encounter between the earthquake and the passionate body (with its attachments, its stories and its affects and evaluations) that the geological and physical phenomenon threatens, that this natural event, which can only take place according to natural and physical laws, is seen as disastrous. As Spinoza writes in the Political Treatise, “These things, though troublesome, are inevitable, and have definite causes through which we try to understand their nature. And the mind derives as much enjoyment in contemplating them aright as from the knowledge of things that are pleasing to the senses”. In this sense, from the general perspective of the laws of nature and their necessary chain of causes, even human phenomena would appear to us not as an object of judgement and repulsion, but of understanding: “And in order to enquire into matters relevant to this branch of knowledge in the same unfettered spirit as is habitually shown in mathematical studies, I have taken great care not to deride, bewail, or execrate human actions, but to understand them. So I have regarded human emotions such as love, hatred, anger, envy, pride, pity, and other agitations of the mind not as vices of human nature but as properties pertaining to it in the same way as heat, cold, storm, thunder, and such pertain to the nature of the atmosphere” (Spinoza, Complete Works, 681).
of pathos in and form which they emerge, as if they aimed to look at the human reactions, to use Spinoza’s phrase, “just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies”.510

There is no space, in the physical domain of phenomena, for therapeutics.511 A physical property, according to Canguilhem’s reading of Bichat, never loses its “natural type” and therefore do not need to be addressed therapeutically, it does not require to be restored or transformed. Even the movement that destroys a certain thing is not in disagreement with that thing at a physical level, from the perspective of its mechanical causes and effects. It is the realm of life that relates to certain phenomena from the perspective of value and qualitative distinctions. Health and sickness, for example, are both characterised (as Bernard had shown) by the same physical and chemical laws. In this sense, it would be absurd to say that a certain state that I experience as negative or undesirable contradicts the laws of nature, for all movements that take place in the natural world are natural, that is to say, they take place in conformity with the laws of nature. The biological sphere cannot therefore be an exception to this: all its phenomena take place necessarily according to these laws (and conditions), which does not mean, however, that the living being is indifferent to them.512

Thus, one must always employ different methods in one’s approach to vital phenomena. Here, Canguilhem, who had been initially critical of Bergson and Bergsonism, returns to this author, subscribing to the idea that the analysis of the “fait vital” must use different methods than those employed in physics to explain inert matter. According to Braunstein, Canguilhem agrees with Bergson that “la première condition pour brutaliser un être est de le tenir pour brut”.513 This position reveals that Canguilhem’s effort to distinguish

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510 Spinoza, Ethics, London: Penguin, 1996, 69 (Part III, Preface). One must, however, not separate, in Spinoza, this very physical and mathematical perspective from the possibility of philosophical therapy and a liberation from certain forms of bondage (as he will develop in Part IV and V; one could argue that the mechanic and geometrical view of the passions already have therapeutic effects).

511 In Aristotle’s physics, Canguilhem shows, there would be space for speaking of a “pathological mechanics” due to a qualitative differentiation between two sorts of movement: “One might say that long ago Aristotle believed in a pathological mechanics since he admitted two kinds of movements: natural movements through which a body regains its proper place where it thrives at rest, as a stone goes down to the ground, and fire, up to the sky; - and violent movements by which a body is pushed from its proper place, as when a stone is thrown in the air. It can be said that with Galileo and Descartes, progress in knowledge of the physical world consisted in considering all movements as natural, that is, as conforming to the laws of nature, and that likewise progress in biological knowledge consisted in unifying the laws of natural life and pathological life” (NP, 128).

512 This is clear when Canguilhem asks whether the environment is a system of mechanical, physical and chemical constants. His answer is that “laws are theoretical abstractions” and that “the living creature does not live among laws but among creatures and events”. Therefore, “the qualified living being lives in a world of qualified objects, he lives in a world of possible accidents”. In this sense, life “ignores geometrical rigidity, it is discussion or explanation (…) with an environment where there are leaks, wholes, escapes and unexpected resistances” (NP, 198).

513 Braunstein, “Canguilhem avant Canguilhem”, 17.
the domain of the vital has ethical implications and presuppositions: it is also a care of life, and ethical attention to the non-indifferent aspect of effects in the vital domain, and mainly the existence of pain and suffering.

Canguilhem believes that being alive means selection and differentiation. Even “the simplest biological nutritive system of assimilation and excretion expresses a polarity”.\(^{514}\) His example is clear:

> When the wastes of digestion are no longer excreted by the organism and congest or poison the internal environment, this is all indeed according to a [natural, physico-chemical] law, but none of this follows the norm, which is the activity of the organism itself. This is the simple fact we want to point out when we speak of biological normativity.\(^{515}\)

In this sense, a “digestive tract” as well as other organs, “constitute an organism’s behavioural norms”.\(^{516}\) Hence it is clear that not only does the experience of positive and negative states by an organism originates certain norms, but also that the organism itself embodies certain norms of behaviour.

But how to characterise these norms? In the quantitative perspective, the norm appeared as an underlying \textit{a priori} scale in relation to which one could evaluate certain phenomena as pathological – and work in the sense of correcting them. From the qualitative perspective, however, the norm appears as closely related to what Canguilhem characterised as the \textit{vital polarity} of experience. Even if Canguilhem’s example (digestive tract, sexual organs, etc) norms could seem to be a sort of fixed script which the organism embodies and performs, and therefore, necessary modes of operation, related to the organic structure of the organism, norms are, on the contrary, contingent, habitual and express the \textit{plasticity} of life. Norms stand for the solutions that the living being gives to crisis, trouble and situations of danger: norms are \textit{a way out}, an overcoming of a certain situation of negativity, and the product of the activity and the vital force of normativity.

On the one hand, one could say that the norm is the result, that is, the temporary “solution” that the organism finds in its struggle with what it experiences as negative. In this sense, the norm is a creative response that life gives to what threatens it, and it is connected to its history (and to the “life story” of each singular organism, each individual life form). If

\(^{514}\) NP, 128.
\(^{515}\) NP, 129.
\(^{516}\) NP, 136. He adds: “Psychoanalysis is indeed right to give the name \textit{poles} to natural orifices of ingestion and excretion. A function does not work indifferently in several directions. A need places the proposed objects of satisfaction in relation to propulsion or repulsion. There is a dynamic polarity of life” (NP, 136).
the physical and chemical laws determine an abstract field of possibility for the responses an organism gives in different situations, the norm corresponds to the singular response to the experience of negativity.

Norms also define the forms and schemes of dispositions and responses that can be embodied in the structures of an organism or in the dynamics of behaviour of a living being. In Canguilhem’s thesis, norms also appear in the interaction and shaping of the organism with its environment as a sort of grid of interpretation of phenomena and of the situations confronted by the organism throughout its path in the world. As such, they also set parameters to establish relations with self, others and world. A key aspect that we should retain from Canguilhem’s notion of norm is its strict relation to the notion of a way of life, or a way of being. Life is, for him information of material, and what attributes form in this process of information is the norm. Every living being embodies and performs its norms as immanent principles of behaviour. In this sense the norms would be a principle of configuration: both of the organism’s relation to its surroundings (since the constellation of norms that constitute a form of life is always related to a specific history of the relation between the living being and its environment), and the modes of action through which the living being informs and shapes its environment. This is because “le propre du vivant, c’est de se faire son milieu.”

Norms, then, connect behaviour, values and ways of being, stabilised in certain dispositions and structures. If norms are also responses to the experience or perception of certain forms of negativity, one could also say that in the effort of the living to select and differentiate, norms are also a standard which leads us to exclude or reject something – it is also the no the organism says to the environment and its pressures. It his perspective, norms also presuppose limitation. In this setting of limits, however, norms simultaneously delineate and open a certain immanent field of action and experience to be explored.

If “biological norms exist it is because of life, as not only the subject to the environment, but also as an institution of its own environment, thereby posits values not

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517 As we have seen, Foucault highlighted this aspect of Canguilhem’s notion of life, interpreting as information (EW2, 475) The living, especially the human being, has to “gather information” in her relation with the environment.
518 This expression comes from HS, 10.
519 Foucault’s interpretation in “Life: Experience and Science” seems to characterise information from a perspective of coding and decoding and, in the human being, as an epistemological process. I believe that we can characterise it as a process of giving form: life informs itself, materials and the environment through its norms.
520 CV, 184. Canguilhem’s main references in this sense are Jakob von Uexküll and Kurt Goldstein.
only in the environment but also in the organism itself”. This position of value and institution of norms leads us precisely to the theoretical core of Canguilhem’s medicine thesis: *vital normativity*.

We have seen that, for Canguilhem, life is polarised activity of opposition to indifference and inertia. Living beings are not indifferent to the conditions in which their life is possible. The fact of being alive is, for Canguilhem, already an evaluation. If we return here to our reflection on technique and therapeutics, we will recall that they were understood as a sort of *partisan* activity of life – taking place through the human being – against the conditions that undermine it. This is particularly clear in the case of medicine. Canguilhem believes that human activity – in “a more or less lucid way” – “extends a spontaneous effort peculiar to life, to struggle against that which obstructs its preservation and development taken as norms”. Human action extends life’s polarised activity against threats and the impoverishment of its possibilities of development and unfolding. Life, therefore, is “unconscious position of value” or, in fact, “normative activity”. The latter, as Canguilhem has shown, expresses the fundamental relation between *life* and *norms* which he calls *vital normativity*.

We usually think of normativity as something that belongs to the realm of ‘oughts’ – to the realm of prescription – or ‘rule following’. That is to say, we usually think of the notion of normativity as a relation to existing norms, which explains our adherence to norms, or why we follow certain rules or prescriptions in moral action. Canguilhem’s definition of normativity, on the other hand, expresses more the activity and capacity to establish and institute norms than the judgement that refers a fact to a norm or a behaviour which adheres to norms and rules through justification and the presentation of reasons. As Canguilhem phrases it: “Normative, in philosophy, means every judgement which evaluates a fact in relation to a norm, but this mode of judgement is essentially subordinated to that which establishes norms”.

Therefore, following Canguilhem’s analysis, the procedures and realities that philosophy usually characterises as normative (and here I mean both the act of referring a fact to a norm and the behaviour which adheres to norms) are, indeed, ‘normative’ in a

521 NP, 227.
522 NP, 125.
523 NP, 125.
524 NP, 125.
525 NP, 126.
derivative sense. They are fundamentally dependent on the norm and the activity that institutes it: “Normative in the fullest sense of the word”, Canguilhem proposes, “is that which establishes norms”.526

In its experience of polarity, life is normative precisely because its activity consists in evaluating, in asserting and proposing norms, which could be understood as ways of being, forms of existence, dispositions in relations to the environment, patterns of action in the world – but also structural organisation, functional constants and other habitual characteristics stabilised in a certain living form. Because, as we have seen, “there is no biological indifference”, we can speak of a “biological normativity”.527 The fact that being alive means a certain form of organisation documents that instituting and organising power which is normativity.

In short, if we usually refer normativity to existing norms and our capacity to follow them or adhere to them, Canguilhem defines normativity as an effort and a force related to the polarised experience of living beings. In this view, normativity is different from the labour of bringing a fact to the ‘norm’ or the ‘normal’, in the sense of the Latin norma (the scale or the T-square), which precisely is employed for squaring or framing the fact according to a pre-established prescription. To say that something is ‘normative’, for Canguilhem, would be fundamentally different from saying that something is ‘normalising’ or ‘normalised’ (or ‘normal’ in the sense of agreeing and conforming to the rule of the T-square). Recalling our analysis of the positivist thesis, it becomes clear that in a normalising context, divergence is seen as a deviation of pre-established norms. In the quantitative view, deviation only exaggerates or deprives, but never creates. The perspective of normativity, on the other hand, sees in divergent forms of being a different possible norm, a process of research for a new solution, or even the embodiment of different solutions to life’s struggle with the environment and its dangers. Deviations are, from the perspective of normativity, essential to the creative and innovative dimension of life; they are “inventions on the road to new forms”.528 Phrasing it differently, normalised and pre-existing norms (which one usually associates with the ‘normal’) are an image of life seen from the perspective of stagnation, conservation and crystallisation; normativity, by contrast, is life seen from the perspective of its dynamic process, its movement – which is to say from the standpoint of becoming. Particular ways of life or living forms (including organic structures and functional constants)

526 NP, 126.
527 NP, 129.
528 NP, 140.
are but a snapshot, a depiction, a frozen moment of this dynamic process. It is in this sense, Canguilhem claims that even biological species are but “momentary normalisations”. More abstractly speaking, one could say that normalisation is the solidification of a fluid process in a more or less static form in a situated context of specific challenges and problems, while normativity is the fluid process of coming-to-form, which makes it possible to respond to, but also overcome these challenges and problems – as well as to break stagnated and solidified forms in the name of renewed activity.

Before returning to our analysis of Foucault’s work from the conceptual standpoint that our reading of Canguilhem constitutes, let us now turn to the experience of illness – which I think constitutes a fundamental scene for the understanding of norms and normativity. This analysis – and a series of parallels with Nietzsche’s reflections on health and disease – will allow us a brief exploration of the experience of illness as a metaphor for subjectivation.

5.1. Disease and Experimentation of Norms

As we have seen, Canguilhem proposed a shift in perspectives regarding sickness: from the perspective of the physician and the scientist to that of the sick person; that is to say, from the perspective of a cold, purified and objective gaze – to use Foucault’s words – to the point of view of the urgency of crisis and the critical situation of suffering. In that which we could call Canguilhem’s ‘archaeology’ of the perception of disease, the “responsibility for perceiving the outset of disease” is attributed or, as he says, “delegated” to the “living being himself, considered in his dynamic polarity”. It is, therefore, the perspective of the individual who experiences her own condition under the sign of pathos, which is called to give her testimony in pathology.

529 NP, 143.
530 See HF, 437-443, and BC, especially “Preface” and “Spaces and Classes”.
531 NP, 181. I employ the term ‘archaeology’ here in a loose sense; even though there are similarities between Canguilhem’s approach and the uncovering of forgotten or buried strata of experience, for instance, and Foucault’s notion of ‘archaeology of silence’ in the History of Madness, Canguilhem’s notion has phenomenological undertones, when the perspective of the sick person (or la maladie du malade) is defined through a first person lived experience. This dimension seems to absent from Foucault’s notion. On the other hand, this lived experience is rooted in life itself and is not exclusive of a subject as a given instance and source of meaning.
532 NP, 137.
From this perspective, there are two main modes or experiences of life: life as healthy and sick, as normal and pathological. As we have seen, life is spoken of in many ways – and these ways are the different norms that define a form of life, or how a life is (this life, this way of life or living form). It is, then, at the level of the experience of norms that we must understand these two modes that emerge in the life and the perception of the individual who suffers.

Differently, therefore, from what one could think, disease is not the absence of norms. If life is always actualised, informed, embodied in particular norms or, in a word, exists through and as its norms; and, what is more, if norms are dispositions, systems of response to the environment and embodied habits – or, in a word, hexis – then disease, inasmuch as it is a mode of life, must always be referred to norms. As Canguilhem spells out: “the pathological is not the absence of a biological norm: it is another norm, which is, comparatively speaking, pushed aside by life”.

On the other hand, one could also think of disease as the absence of order, as a sort of chaotic disorganisation of certain functions, arrangements or performances or, in short, as disorder. But Canguilhem also discards that idea. In the same way that there is always a norm, there is also an order, here understood as a correlation or constellation of norms, even when this order is not immediately experienced as such, or as ‘positive’. For the organism itself is a sort of order, an organised whole – which does not mean that it is healthy or, as Comte would think of it, harmonious. Through a Bergsonian insight, Canguilhem shows that, in disease, there is “no disorder” but the “substitution for an expected and loved order of another or der, which either makes no difference or from which one suffers”. So, disease is neither disorder nor the absence of norm. On the contrary, it is rather a form of life.

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533 There is a certain polysemy regarding the notion of normal and the way Canguilhem employs it. He is a critic of the normal in the positivistic sense we have analysed, but the experience of ‘normality’ in a certain situation could be an index of a ‘normative’ position with regards to that situation and other possible situations.

534 The reader will recall that the individual as a totality who suffers is the fundamental unity underlying the experience of disease. See Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 29.

535 NP, 144.

536 In this Canguilhem clearly departs from the quantitative view: we have seen that, in Comte, one finds an underlying qualitative idea of order as harmony associated with the physiological state, which implies that disease would be a break of order and, therefore, disorder. Neither is the physiological state harmonious nor the pathological pure disorder: they constitute antagonist orders.

537 NP, 194. I think there is an inconsistency on Canguilhem’s part here, perhaps he tries to accommodate a Bergsonian insight. If life is polarised experience, how can we say that an ‘indifferent’ order is possible?
configured by and around norms. But why are these norms “pushed aside by life” – which is to say, why are they experienced negatively?

Perhaps, unpacking Canguilhem’s analysis, we could say that they are experienced negatively in two ways: first, in the sense that they emerge under the form of a break or a discontinuity with the previous state which we evaluated positively, a state we loved and become nostalgic about. Second, disease reveals its negative aspect in normalisation,\(^{538}\) that is, not only in the interruption or infraction of an order we loved, but also in the fixation in well-defined conditions of existence, in norms of behaviour and patterns of action in which one feels trapped and no longer able to change – a sort of ‘iron cage’ of norms which make preservation of and a continuation in life possible, but which are experienced as oppressive or diminishing. If the first is a critical episode, an unexpected event that call our norms of life into question and threat our existence, the second is the stagnation in a mode of existence in which one “feels inferior to the tasks which a new situation imposes”\(^{539}\) and thus narrows one’s environment to match the impoverished felling of one’s own capacities. This sedimentation of norms makes the sick person impotent in responding to the demands of the environment – both of the previous or current environment in which one lives when it begins to ask for a new deployment of normativity in order for the living being to respond to its changes and threats, and of new possible environments requiring new norms.\(^{540}\)

Let us begin with the first set of ideas. In our analysis of Canguilhem’s critique of the quantitative thesis, as well as in his reflections on therapy and the prominence of technique – of the ‘technical adventure’ – over theoretical knowledge, we have underlined the importance of the experience of pain and suffering or, to use Lecourt’s phrase, the “painful awareness of an obstacle” that called for intervention. Pain was seen a sui generis experience in the story of a living being, breaking the “silence of the organs”, and introducing in life a sort of “vital wonder” which propelled both technique and therapy, on the one hand, and the enquiry on causes and functional mechanisms, on the other.

\(^{538}\) “The sick being is normalised...” (NP, 183).
\(^{539}\) NP, 182.
\(^{540}\) Canguilhem reflects on these two possible ways of positioning oneself in relation to the environment based on Goldstein’s examples of patients with brain lesions. In these cases, Goldstein’s patients frequently established new norms of life by “a reduction in the level of their activity as related to a new, but narrowed environment”. In this sense, “the patient is sick because he can admit only one norm” (NP, 185). In the first case, the patient reduced the environment to a universe he was able to control. In the second, he feels unable to offer new norms to a new environment, or for a change in the one in which he situates himself.
In this interruption of the course of a living being’s trajectory, in breaking a *stasis*,
disease reveals the relation between life and time; it reveals life is a temporal
phenomenon.\(^{541}\) This relation to temporality was lived as continuity and duration, but
disease introduces a *break* – a new “chronological succession”. Differently from anomaly,
which Canguilhem defines as “spatial multiplicity” (we could say the different forms of being
which different individuals embody, synchronically), disease is “chronological succession”
(that is to say, different forms of living and norms of life of a same individual, considered
diachronically).\(^{542}\) This is why we are sick in relation “not only to others”, as Canguilhem
explains, but fundamentally in relation to ourselves.\(^{543}\) From the viewpoint of this *break*
introduced by disease as a *critical episode*,\(^{544}\) any given point of the trajectory of a living
being in the world appears as a temporary stabilisation of a form of life, which can be
disrupted by the appearance of disease.\(^{545}\)

In this idea of a break in the temporary stabilisations we call ‘the normal’, disease
appears as a chronological succession of qualitatively different norms and forms of being, we
can clearly see one of the instantiations of Canguilhem’s general project of “introducing
History into the realm of Life”. If, based on Goldstein’s work, Canguilhem can that disease is
indeed the emergence of a “a new way of life, characterised by new physiological constants
and new mechanisms”,\(^{546}\) then the relation between history and life – as variation of norms
– must be thought as discontinuous. In this sense, disease reveals the historical aspect of life.
As historical temporality, the chronological succession that life ‘discovers’ in disease, is

\(^{541}\) “It is a characteristic of disease that it interrupts a course” (NP, 138).
\(^{542}\) One could add that, in his reading of Goldstein, Canguilhem finds the idea of an individual relativity
of biological norms, which is to say that biological norms are relative to an individual in a given
particular situation (NP, 182). In this sense, what is normal in a particular given situation can become
pathological in another situation. Finally, this relativity does not mean that normal and pathological
are not distinguishable in the individual’s experience. On the contrary: “The borderline between
normal and pathological is imprecise for several individuals considered simultaneously but it is
perfectly precise for one and the same individual considered successively” (NP, 182).
\(^{543}\) NP, 138.
\(^{544}\) In this sense of an ‘episode’, we say that a disease is critical when it is not (or not yet) chronic; on
the other hand, medical term also includes the turning point in the development of a disease, which
can lead to recovery or to death. A crisis, then, is always a condition of instability or danger. Collin’s
Dictionary of Medical Terms (London: A & C Black, 2005, 93) also defines crisis as “a situation or period
of difficulty demanding action”. However, one could also say that disease is critical in the Greek sense
of *Kρίνω*, which is related to distinguishing, separating, ordering, choosing or preferring. *Kρίνω* also
means to decide a dispute. In short, I refer here to a process whose development and course are
uncertain (or to be decided), which requires careful and cautious evaluation, as well as – we would
add with Canguilhem – the proposition of new norms.
\(^{545}\) This trajectory is a history of the different norms of life that the living being embodies and the
succession –
marked by the interruptions – of ways of life by disease.
\(^{546}\) NP, 188.
irreversible. Therefore, disease is also a “positive, innovative experience in the living being and not just a fact of increase and decrease” \(^{547}\). That is to say, given this irreversibility in the phenomena of life, disease always introduce difference and convalescence is a ‘way forwards’ in difference, in the sense that what we call healing means creating new norms on the basis of the innovative experience of disease and as a reaction to it. As the experience of a lack, an obstacle, a risk, disease calls for normative activity, for new solutions or, in a word, for the position of new norms. In this sense we could say that disease is also an occasion (in the Greek sense of \(\textit{kairós}\)) \(^{548}\), since the break with an established order, a crystallised constellation of norms is also a \(\textit{caesura}\) \(^{549}\), that is, the opportunity for a new organisation and the creation of a different form of life. If the history of living beings is the history of the discontinuity of norms in disease, this must also be a history of the creation of ways of life.

Here, once again, one notes a particular version of the qualitative thesis. If the interruption caused by a new way of life – which emerges in spite of the agent’s (or, in this case, of the patient’s) \(^{549}\) \(^{550}\) decision – provokes a ‘vital wonder’ that will originate knowledge, it also provokes a negative perception of one’s mode of life and position in the environment, driving the creation of new norms. In this sense, as I claimed, disease is the \(\textit{scenario}\) – the stage in the theatrical sense – for the creation and performance of new norms, it is the place and the occasion in which old norms – or new, but diminishing and ‘repulsive’ ones – are experienced in their negativity, and where life’s normative force presents new norms. It is against the dramatic background of disease, that the deployment of normative capacity appears to us in its clearest form. One will recall Leriche’s description of physiology as a sort of inventory of temporary and stabilised solutions for the problems of disease and the challenges of the environment – which leads us to conceive it, with Canguilhem, as historical discipline, which documents our sufferings and the different deployments of normativity. If physiology provides us with a history of stabilised solutions, in disease we see life’s dynamic search for these solutions while confronting problems that it does not know in advance how

\(^{547}\) NP, 185.

\(^{548}\) Le Blanc also employed this term, but in a different way. See \textit{Canguilhem et les normes}, 105.

\(^{549}\) I employ this term thinking of Andrew Benjamin’s “\(\textit{caesura of allowing}\)”: “What is significant about a conception of the \(\textit{caesura}\) as that which allows is both the quality of that suspension, the initial catastrophe and that which comes to be staged as a result. What the caesura allows cannot be determined in advance. The catastrophic in this instance therefore occasions” (\textit{Place, Commonality, Judgement: Continental Philosophy and the Ancient Greeks}, London: Continuum, 2010, 9).

\(^{550}\) Here the medical term shares its meaning with the philosophical term, for one dimension of disease is that the patient is the one who suffers an action, or as Canguilhem writes, the person who experiences the pathological as \(\textit{pathos}\).
to overcome. From this perspective, one could see in disease an exploration of physiological possibilities, life’s research for new norms and modes of being.

The experience of disease is accidental inasmuch as it is critical interruption linked to life’s vulnerability and precarity in its relations to the environment. However, it is not accidental in the sense that life would be primarily or necessarily healthy or a life without disease. On the contrary, disease is essential to life. As Canguilhem explains, the very “experience of the living includes disease”.\textsuperscript{551} It is though sickness that life transforms itself, through the vital polarity with which it navigates the world. To use a metaphor, one could say that the engine of life’s transformation is to be found in its struggle against the negative states it groups under the notion of pathological. Disease is an essential part of life, but it is lived as a “state against which it is necessary to struggle in order to go on living”, and here the “persistence of life serves as a norm”.\textsuperscript{552} Like Nietzsche before him, Canguilhem’s philosophical effort is that of integrating suffering, pain and disease as constitutive experiences of life and health – without dissolving the particular existential and physiological density of these experiences and the fact that we learn from them.\textsuperscript{553} From this perspective, methodical rigour and the history of concepts, Canguilhem could be considered a tragic thinker, or one who cultivates the “tragic insight”,\textsuperscript{554} trying to integrate the “most terrible aspects” of existence in his concepts of health and life.\textsuperscript{555}

The second modality in the experience of disease is that of normalisation. In this case, disease is seen less from the perspective of a critical interruption and discontinuity, and more from the viewpoint of the naturalisation of habits and norms of life, which gradually become fixed and solidified: forms that lose their aspect of dynamic information and become frozen throughout time or, to put it differently, habits and systems of response which only repeat and replicate themselves. In this case, Canguilhem explains, “disease is still a norm of life but it is an inferior norm in the sense that it tolerates no deviation from the conditions in which it is valid, incapable as it is of changing itself into another norm”.\textsuperscript{556} Here, one can note a reduction – as in the case of Goldstein’s patients, victims of brain lesion – of the level of activity and exposure to the environment, and the fixation of one’s performances and

\textsuperscript{551} NP, 138.
\textsuperscript{552} NP, 138.
\textsuperscript{553} See, for instance, Ecce Homo (Why I am so Wise, §1).
\textsuperscript{554} Nietzsche, Gay Science, 328.
\textsuperscript{555} “He that is richest in the fullness of life (…) cannot only afford the sight of the terrible and questionable but even the terrible deed and any luxury of destruction, decomposition and negation” (Nietzsche, Gay Science, 328).
\textsuperscript{556} NP, 183.
experiences within a narrowed environment.\footnote{NP, 185.} Being *normalised*, Canguilhem shows, is marked by the incapacity of the sick person to be normative. In fact, the “patient is sick because he can admit only one norm”.\footnote{NP, 185.} It is precisely that normative capacity that here appears as undermined: one can no longer tolerate infractions and changes in one’s own conditions of existence and environment. As Canguilhem spells out: “the sick living being is normalised in well-defined conditions of existence and has lost its normative capacity to establish other norms in other conditions”.\footnote{NP, 183.} Instead of coping creatively with a new situation of danger or difficulty, the organism becomes stagnated in the terrain of life that its sedimented norms had configured and is unable to affirm the *vital wonder* generated by crisis unfolding it into new ways of response.

We have seen that there are two different forms of experiencing disease: as infraction and break, and as stagnation and normalisation. These two modalities can overlap and, furthermore, they refer to a same focal point: the absence, weakening or diminishing of one’s normative capacity. With that in mind, we can now turn to Canguilhem’s notion of health.

### 5.2. Canguilhem’s Tragic Health

If life is historical, the same is valid for health. What we call health are temporary solutions to trouble and crisis given by vital normativity. However, since life does not recognise reversibility,\footnote{NP, 196.} health must always be a new state, a new accomplishment — that is to say, an innovation, and not a return or a reestablishment of a previous state. Hence, Canguilhem can say, with Goldstein, that a “new state of health is not the same as the old one”.\footnote{NP, 194.} Heath, thus, in the absolute sense means the living being’s “boundless capacity for creating new norms”.\footnote{NP, 196.} This means not ‘this’ present healthy or normal state, but the process and the dynamic capacity for getting well, the force that is mobilised in the living being’s multiple convalescences. As Canguilhem explains, “being healthy means being not only normal in a given situation, but also normative in this and other eventual situations”.\footnote{NP, 196.} Health does not mean to dwell in an unchanging state, but on the contrary, the possibility and the capacity
“to fall sick and recover”.564 More than constant preservation in one sort of normalised and pre-determined ‘healthy’ condition, health is plasticity and the capacity for falling sick and “traversing many kinds of health”.565

For Canguilhem, health is something of the order of creative institution and inauguration of forms – not of preservation and conservation in existence, but of risk and expansion. As he writes:

Philosophers argue as to whether the living being’s fundamental tendency is to conserve or expand. Medical experience would indeed seem to bear an important argument in the debate. Goldstein notes that morbid concern to avoid situations which might eventually generate catastrophic reactions expresses the conservation instinct. According to him, this instinct is not the general law of life but the law of a withdrawn life. The healthy organism tries less to maintain itself in its present state and environment than to realise its nature.566

In Goldstein, Canguilhem finds a way to revisit a fundamental philosophical problem. With Nietzsche, Canguilhem thinks that health is less about conservation, but actualisation, realisation, deployment and unfolding “of one’s nature”.567 This presupposes an openness to the world, that is to say it presupposes facing risks and accepting the “eventuality of catastrophic reactions”.568 This sense of tragic openness, of integrating the risks and threats as part of healthy life, is also a capacity for tolerating infractions and disruptions of one’s habits and norms, for incorporating deviations and accidents.

Health presupposes disease, and the ‘luxury to fall ill’569 is life’s test [épreuve] of health not as a state but as normative plasticity, that is, as the capacity to change one’s way of life by the institution of new norms.570 Disease is also a test of one’s norms. In the same

564 NP, 198-199.
565 This is the expression Nietzsche uses in the preface for the second edition of the Gay Science: “A philosopher who has traversed many kinds of health, and keeps traversing them, has passed through an equal number of philosophies” (35).
566 NP, 199.
567 “To wish to preserve oneself”, as Nietzsche explains in the Gay Science, “is a sign of distress, of a limitation of the truly basic life instinct, which aims at the expansion of power and in doing so often enough risks and sacrifices self-preservation” (291-292). To Nietzsche, we could add Spinoza as an important reference in this reflection. The phrase itself seems to refer to Spinoza’s version of the conatus. If Hobbes defined the conatus in a fundamentally negative way – in the form of conservation and self-preservation – Spinoza seems to integrate this dimension into a broader notion, which also encompasses the unfolding of a thing’s nature in the world.
568 NP, 199.
569 See Nietzsche, Gay Science, 328.
570 I emphasise this notion of épreuve because of its Foucauldian tone: for Foucault, the épreuve is one of the main categories of the practices of the self and one of the main tools of self-transformation and subjectivation (see, for instance, UP, 9 and HS, 17 and 24 March). In HS, Foucault clearly speaks of tests as exercises (in the Stoic context) for developing a forma vitae; in this discussion, he explains,
way that Nietzsche in *Schopenhauer as Educator* thinks of the possibility of living by it is the sole possible test and critique of a philosophy, the same is valid for the Canguilhemian idea of a *test* and *critique* of norms in disease. When falling ill, one asks: could I keep living by the norms that are now put to test? Could I live by the norms that emerge in disease itself? Can these norms stand the test of crises or disruption? As Canguilhem explains:

The healthy man does not flee before the problems posed by sometimes sudden disruptions of his habits, even physiologically speaking, he measures his health in terms of his capacity to overcome organic crises in order to establish a new order. In this sense, health for Canguilhem presupposes the possibility of the abuse of health, the capacity and willingness to go beyond normalised norms and the safety of a withdrawn life. It is through the exposure to the test and risks of disease that life re-emerges as healthy. According to Canguilhem: “The essential thing is to be raised from an abyss of impotence and suffering where the sick man almost died; the essential thing is to have had a narrow space”.  

Health, then, is more than mere adaptation to the environment and its demands: it is rather defined as a sort of expenditure and “superabundance of means”. More than normality, healthy is normativity. This superabundance surpasses the mere adaptation to a particular situation in which our temporary norms and solutions are felt as being normal, it manifests itself rather in facing and traversing the challenges of the environment, it is indeed a capacity to endure, tolerate instabilities and, in face of risk and adversity, create forms of being in which one incorporates that which one’s previous norms exclude and forbid. Superior norms are, for Canguilhem, norms that admit more flexibility, that include what for other normalised norms would be the cause a catastrophic reaction. In this sense,

the *épreuve* becomes a general attitude towards reality: “the whole life must become a test” (HS, 432). I believe there is an interesting convergence with Canguilhem to be explored here, if one does not lose sight of the important contextual differences. In the discussion of Canguilhem’s work, I follow the use Le Blanc proposed of the term *épreuve* in the chapter “La vie à l’épreuve de la maladie” in his *Canguilhem et les normes*.

571 “The only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves something, namely trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities: all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words”. (Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 187).

572 NP, 200.

573 NP, 119.

574 NP, 200. Earlier in the book, Canguilhem quotes Ey, who writes: “The normal man is not a mean correlative to a social concept, it is not a judgement of reality but rather a judgement of value; it is a limiting notion which defines a being’s maximum psychic capacity. There is no upper limit to normality” (NP, 119).

575 For Canguilhem, superior norms are not set in stone, but are situational and contingent. Norms are considered inferior in terms of their “stability, fecundity and variability”, which is how we define and
normativity also includes the capacity to break norms that become too narrow, to destroy constellations of norms that form ways of life that are merely reactive or based on the care to conserve.

The capacity for rupture, the tolerance to infraction, and the activity to institute new norms is, in synthesis, the meaning of vital normativity and the way the living being lives its history. Health is, from this perspective, a historical outcome of a trajectory of struggle against illness. In the struggle against illness, the living being is more normative the more it is capable of tolerating disruptions of its stabilised mode of life and habits, the more it is able to traverse suffering and, through the experience of negative values, to create new norms. As Canguilhem spells out: “What characterises health is the possibility of transcending the norm, which defines the momentary normal, the possibility of tolerating infractions of the habitual norm and instituting new norms in new situations”. 576

Although risking a psychologising and biographical reading – which is not always the most rigorous procedure in philosophy – how could one avoid thinking that Canguilhem’s reflections on health are closely linked to his experience in war and in the Résistance and that the historical experience finds its way into his theoretical work? 577 Like disease, war puts life in danger. In disease the living being resists death and tries to institute a new norm which would be different from the expansion of death and destruction. But the peace one finds in health is only a contingent balance of forces and the outcome of conflict and resistance. 578 Health is not the purification of existence from its negative and destructive aspects, but the capacity to resist them, and overcome them, to rebel against them, through an active refusal. In this perspective, we could use Nietzsche’s words on Heraclitus to characterise Canguilhem’s dynamic notion health: “The things in whose definiteness and endurance narrow human minds, like animal minds, believe have no real existence. They are

experience them comparatively as pathological (NP, 144). On the other hand, “a norm of life is superior when it includes what the latter permits and what it forbids” (NP, 182).

576 NP, 196-197.
577 Roudinesco explores this analogy between the crisis lived in illness and war: “On sait bien que les circonstances liées à la guerre renversent les normes habituelles d’une situation de paix et permettent de comprendre autrement les relations de la norme et la pathologie. A l’image de la guerre, la maladie est un ébranlement et une mise en péril de l’existence, à travers laquelle l’organisme réagit de façon catastrophique dans un milieu que lui est propre. Et, dans l’urgence de la guerre, il y a toujours un médecin pour se mettre (...) au service du malade et parfois pour concevoir une nouvelle théorie de la norme” (“Georges Canguilhem, de la médecine à la résistance”, 31).
578 Here, one could say with the young Canguilhem, that which some uncompromising pacifists call peace is, in reality, another word for war. CE1, 921.
but the flash and spark of drawn swords, the quick radiance of victory in the struggle of the opposites.”

From this angle, one could say that, like Nietzsche, Canguilhem proposes an image of life as struggle and tragic conflict. However, one should avoid misinterpreting this view as an apology and eulogy of war – as Fouillée does in his reading of Nietzsche. One must not forget Canguilhem’s initial radical pacifism, his political stance against violence and his ethical and medical fight against suffering and oppression. Most importantly, one must not forget the centrality of Canguilhem’s antifascism in his intellectual and political trajectory.

What is at stake in Canguilhem’s ‘conflictual’ or ‘agonistic’ position is rather the awareness of the incomplete and unachieved aspect of every possible state of health and normality. In other words, it is the awareness of life’s precarity, of the vulnerability of the living being who is always exposed to accidents, crises and disease. It is also the ethical and political awareness that the definition of a single and particular set of norms and forms of life as ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ – without tolerance for infraction and change – would be the same as authoritarian political oppression, and the silencing of the divergence that is indispensable for the advancement of life. Against a norm set in stone, and a totalising and definitive partage between normal and pathological, Canguilhem defends the right of existence of divergence, the importance of disagreement (both in biology and politics), as well as the possibility of changing all the contingent solutions given to the crises of life. There is no permanent health or a priori normality: they are always precarious accomplishments reached by the living being in its errancy, in its determined striving not to die; they are to be found in the effort and struggle of the human being to live, to create and to love despite death and disease.

Canguilhem’s attempt to integrate death and disease into the experience of the living. This does not mean that Canguilhem sees anything “refined or dignified about it”, to quote Thomas Mann’s phrase. It is through the lens of the negative that they appear to us

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581 See JC.
582 A passage from Nietzsche’s preface to the second edition of the Gay Science can help us understanding this position: “Every philosophy that places peace above war, every ethic with a negative definition of happiness, every metaphysics and physics that knows some finale, some final state of some sort (...) permits the question of whether it was not sickness that inspired the philosopher” (Gay Science, 34).
583 Mann’s character Settembrini says: “Disease has nothing refined about it, nothing dignified. Such a conception is in itself pathological, or at least tends in that direction” (Mann, The Magic Mountain. London: Vintage, 1999, 96).
– as something we struggle against in order to posit value in the world. In a word, temporary enjoyment of health is only achieved through active resistance and constant struggle for the creation of norms that are “open to eventual change”.

It is in life’s exposure to death, in the danger of its loss, that the living being experiences the value of life. In Canguilhem’s philosophy, the living being embraces life, to use Gide’s expression, with the excess of someone who risked losing it. Given this fundamental relationship between life and death, perhaps here we could adapt Foucault’s phrase regarding Bichat’s conception of life by saying that Canguilhem’s ‘vitalism’ can only be fully understood in relation to an underlying ‘mortalism’.

Life and the occurrences of the pathological, as we have seen, are irreversible temporal events. Therefore, there can be no biological ‘ingenuity’ in health, to return to a previous state of equilibrium and regulation. As the product of a struggle – as the sign of a limitation overcome – health is always a second health, a step forwards in the unfolding of life, and never a return or a restoration. As Nietzsche would phrase it, “a new health, stronger, more seasoned, tougher, more audacious...” Health, therefore, does not mean a return to ‘nature’, nor a property that one has, but the very the disposition for convalescence.

In this state of second health, the living being emerges from sickness having learned something from its effects: after resisting the “long pressure of sickness”, it re-emerges having changed itself and its relation to the environment. It is precisely this movement of emerging form disease, having developed and traversed its path – it is the very resurfacing from the depths of negativity and suffering, that constitutes the healthy deployment of

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584 NP, 228.
585 As André Gide writes in the 1927 preface to the Nourritures terrestres, “Il y a, dans son lyrisme même, l’excès de celui qui embrasse la vie comme quelque chose qu’il a faille perdre” (Les nourritures terrestres. Paris : Gallimard, 1964, 11).
586 I am reading Foucault’s concept in his analysis of Bichat (BC, 178) from an ethical and existential viewpoint, borrowing the terms that Foucault uses to characterise Bichat’s position: “that to which life is opposes and that to which life is exposed; that in relation to which it is living opposition, and therefore life” (BC, 177). Differently from Deleuze and Agamben, if there is an idea Foucault retains from his analysis of Bichat is that of death and its negativity. I will develop this idea in a further work.
587 Nietzsche, Gay Science, 346.
588 One could say that health is not a particular given state, but something that “one acquires continually” (Nietzsche, Gay Science, 346).
589 Nietzsche, Gay Science, 32.
normativity. Again, one could describe this process through Nietzsche: “from such abysses, from such severe sickness (...) one returns newborn, having shed one’s skin...”  

In this re-emerging (which is a returning from the adventure of illness and not a returning to a previously constituted state), we can see a new eagerness to live – which in Canguilhem is the constitution of new norms, new habits, new dispositions. Perhaps we could pursue this analogy with Nietzsche, which, despite the differences existing between the German philosopher and Canguilhem’s own project, could help us understanding an important aspect of his notion of health, namely the creative eagerness and capacity to create new forms of living that underpins it. Nietzsche’s newborn in the preface to the Gay Science, or the image of the child in Zarathustra’s metamorphoses, also symbolises this healthy eagerness of the inauguration of new values, an inauguration which is only possible after long suffering and after the break with previous values (or norms of life and their constellation). It is perhaps not by chance that the image of the child also appears in Canguilhem, as the image of a health which is not the care to preserve, to avoid the excess of expenditure and exposure to the world, but precisely the abuse of health.

Reacting to the conception according to which sickness (especially regarding the modes of action that are engendered as a consequence for the brain lesions analysed by Goldstein) would reduce to the adult to the condition of a child, Canguilhem mobilises his notion of normativity to present a different aspect of childhood and the child. The image that Canguilhem uses is that of the child, in its “eagerness”, it raises itself constantly to new norms, which is profoundly at variance with the care to conserve which directs the sick person with his obsession and often exhausting maintenance of the only life within which he feels almost natural, that is, in a position to use and dominate his environment.

In disease, the living being singularises itself, through a series of experiments with different forms of life and transfigurations of itself through them. In the experience of the negative aspects of existence, life finds a terrain of experiments, tests, and affirmation.
“We think that the power and temptation to fall sick are an essential characteristic of human physiology.”\textsuperscript{594} Perfect health is, therefore, abnormal. It would be complete stagnation, a coincidence of one’s activity with already existing norms and, therefore, the death of activity.

To conclude, the health of a living individual is the history of her sufferings and overcoming, a history of her variation of norms and a transit between ways of life. In a word, health is the \textit{odyssey} of multiple convalescences. This history could be described through Nietzsche’s idea of “critical history”. This modality of history, used in the service of life, as Nietzsche explains in the second \textit{Untimely Meditation}, opposes an antiquarian history that knows how to “preserve life, [but] not how to engender it; [for] it always undervalues that which is becoming” and therefore “hinders any (...) attempt to try something new”.\textsuperscript{595} Introducing novelty – in Canguilhem’s phrase, the deployment of normativity – also means breaking and transgressing existing norms (or, as Nietzsche, says offend customs and “piety”). Our health is critical and historical, because it must be plastic enough to discard and destroy certain norms that were beneficial in the past and detrimental to the present and the future, and in order to open a space of the creation of new norms.\textsuperscript{596}

\section*{5.3. Disease and Subjectivity}

Finally, before returning to Foucault and to the mobilisation of the framework of the norm and the normative in the task of interpreting his work, allow me a brief note on a possible interpretation of disease as a metaphor for subjectivation, or as a \textit{scene} in which to visualise the relation between subject and norm, from the perspective made possible by Canguilhem (and Nietzsche).

First, we must sketch a definition of subjectivation based on our discussion up to this point. In this sense, we could define the subject as a contingent and historical form of relation to norms: being a subject means, in this context, being a subject of norms; that is to say, being the subject that embodies, performs or reflect upon norms. On the other hand, one could think of the subject as subject to norms – as the field of application of norms, or the

\textsuperscript{594} NP, 200.
\textsuperscript{595} Nietzsche, \textit{Untimely Meditations}, 75.
\textsuperscript{596} As Nietzsche says: “If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve part of the past: he does this by bringing it before the tribunal, scrupulously examining it and finally condemning; every past is worth to be condemned...” (\textit{Untimely Meditations}, 75-76), and he explains that it is life itself that pronounces the verdict, “that dark driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself” (\textit{Untimely Meditations}, 76).
material articulated or shaped by norms, that which is governed by norms, in its practices and forms of behaviour.

Macherey expresses this complexity in *Le sujet des normes*, when he says that the relation of subject and norms is both constitutive and reciprocal. He explains: “Constitutif: la forme historique actuelle du sujet, qui n’est en rien immuable, le définit essentiellement à partir du rapport qu’il entretient avec des normes”. From this point of view, the norm is what constitute the subject. But the relation is also reciprocal, since norms also require the position of the subject for the success of their operation.

From this perspective, then, the subject is not a given, but the form of a relationship to norms (or between norms and the instances of their application, which they inform and shape, but also the instance of their performance and operation, that which operates with them). If we explore Canguilhem’s idea according to which the living being is always the result of different constellations of norms, organised in a form of life, we could also think that norms are what regulate or govern one’s “relation to self, others and world”, to quote Foucault’s expression. Now, in disease we find at least two forms of this relation.

The first is disease lived from the perspective of negative and repulsive norms, in which one is stabilised and fixated, norms which one is not (or feels that one is not) able to break or change. This, we have seen, is Canguilhem’s definition of disease as normalisation: our norms, while preserving our existence, become a sort of iron cage, a structure that allows the continuation in life, but does not make room for its exploratory expansion, its deviations, its expenditure and its play with new and different norms. This experience arises, because, as Canguilhem writes, “man is a being that always exceeds his needs”. In this case, disease appears as the relation to norms in which the subject is subjected to normalised forms of behaviour, knowledge and self-understanding, not offering a margin of tolerance for other forms. From a Foucauldian perspective, this definition of disease as normalisation could be used as a metaphor for thinking the constitution of the subject through disciplines and confessional technologies. This analogy between normalisation and disease is a fertile terrain for the association of Foucault’s critical project to Nietzsche’s genealogy. In “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, for example, Foucault puts forward a definition of genealogy as a curative science (FR, 90).
forces and energies, while reducing difference and deviation. The subject herself is the result – or as I suggested with Nietzsche, the “second nature” – that emerges from these strict practices of examination, manipulation and training, which produce the internalisation of habits, routines and performances.

As I have shown in my analysis of Canguilhem’s project of “introducing History into Life”, disease reveals the history and the itinerary of living beings in relation to the different norms they embody. It particularly characterises, given life’s polarity, moments when norms are experienced negatively and we begin to see or ‘live’ them as narrowing or normalising – in other words, we begin to see them as subjecting us to a mode of life which has become “repulsive”. The negative experience of this mode of life and its limits seems, in Canguilhem’s account, to create the conditions for a fracture or, at least, a space between the living being and its norms. In this sense, disease is described as an event (or caesura): a moment in which the relation of the subject to norms becomes critical.

This leads us to a second conception of illness, which appears as a failure, as a ‘life gone wrong’, or as an interruption and collapse of norms. As crisis, the event of disease also propels one to the task of creating new norms. Here, we must recall Canguilhem’s definition of healing as the creation of a new state, as a ‘second’ health linked to the active deployment of a normative force. Thus, disease as a critical event shows that we suffer from certain norms and their interruption or infraction, but it also shows that we are producers of norms. As we have seen with Canguilhem, disease as crisis is the occasion for the deployment of plastic and transformative normative activity. And if disease shows how norms work, critical moments show how they are put to work, operating as sort of ‘degree zero’ of normative activity. If the subject is a particular form of relation to and performance of norms, then the same movement of break and creation of norms in disease could provide us a model to think of the ways in which we are both constituted (in our relations to existing norms) and active elements in the way we relate to norms. This analogy shows how, if the subject is normalised in the framework of crystallised norms, subjectivation is also the capacity to break norms and create, assimilate or perform new norms.

If health is not a given, but a never-ending task, the same could be said, within this paradigm, of selfhood and the relation between self and norms, as well as the relations to oneself, others and the world that organise and structure it. In healing – and through the techniques and therapies that operate as an extension of vital normativity – one must constitute a different framework of norms that allow one to reposition oneself in the
environment, producing a new mode of life that is never a return to a health lost. Analogously, subjectivation could be seen as the constitution of oneself which responds to certain questions (according to Foucault, the passions, the need to transform oneself in order to have access to truth, the revolution)\(^601\) and produces a new mode of being in the world and having relations to self and others through the employment and incorporation of new norms (by means of techniques, exercises and practices).

\(^601\) CS, 54; HS, 16; HS, 208, respectively.
PART III – FOUCAULT AND THE POWER OF NORMS

Chapter 6

The Power of Norms

I have previously pointed to two possible paths presented by Foucault in different moments in which he reflected upon the importance of Canguilhem to his own work. The first was proposed in a 1965 letter in which he formulates both the problem the commonality between Canguilhem’s work and his own, and the foundational place that the former occupies in relation to his own research. However, as I have stressed, Foucault then stated the impossibility of fully determining the nature of that relationship and of exploring all its implications. This impossibility was perhaps connected to the fact that Foucault identified in Canguilhem’s work one of the forces still actively shaping a work in progress and a research still developing towards new directions. That is to say, he saw in Canguilhem’s work a source of insights and themes still to be explored. The letter does not present which specific insights, concepts and themes Foucault would later draw from Canguilhem. The letter’s emphasis seems to be on a certain “epistemological eidetics”, which would suggest that from the perspective of the method, Foucault is already aware of the role of Canguilhem as a condition of possibility for his own research. Additionally, he is also aware of how to chronologically situate that impact (“from the Clinique onwards”). As I have shown, this line of thought – i.e. understanding the ‘influence’ and the importance of Canguilhem’s history of science, epistemology and “philosophy of the concept” for the formation of Foucault’s method, in general, and for archaeology in particular – was perhaps the main way into the Foucault-Canguilhem relation.

Furthermore, we have seen that around a decade later, Foucault returns to the problem of Canguilhem’s importance to his work – this time not in the form of a personal and intellectual acknowledgment, but rather as a historical mapping of the intellectual field configured in France between the post-War and the post-1968 period. Thus, “Life: Experience and Science” provided an attempt at analysing with the problem formulated in the 1965 letter from the perspective of an intellectual context, in which Foucault situates his

602 It only does so negatively. This is the case of “vitalism” for example.
603 EW2, 466. See Chapter 3 above.
own work. This text, then, expands and develops Foucault’s relation to Canguilhem’s work beyond a methodological proximity. As we have seen, one of the ways in which one can say Foucault’s work belongs to this field, and one that he is definitely aware of, is clear in his explorations of the notions of subjectivity and subjectivation. Canguilhem’s work made possible, Foucault argues, a new way of thinking subjectivity, outside a the paradigm of a “philosophy of consciousness” or a “philosophy of the subject”. However, before reading Foucault’s reflections on subjectivation from the perspective opened by the reference to Canguilhem, we first need to understand the context in which Foucault’s exploration of the possibilities of different ways of constituting oneself as a subject. This context is precisely the modern politicisation of life and the transitive relation between life and norm that modern governmental technologies put to work. My main aim in Part III is articulating Foucault’s work on power to Canguilhem’s reflections on normalisation and the social norm, in order to situate the power of the norm.

Thus, in this part, I would like to return to the main hypothesis I have previously put forward regarding the relation between Foucault and Canguilhem, and to the interpretative exercise I have then proposed to undertake, namely: exploring the possibility of reading ‘Foucault with Canguilhem’, in the sense proposed by Macherey. Or, as Vazquez-Garcia puts it, to develop the “ontological” and “ethico-political” aspects of this theoretical encounter, pointing to a continuity in terms of “an exchange of concepts and themes” between the two authors.

Following this path, I have proposed two main concepts which can serve as a lens through which one could look at Foucault’s work: norm and normativity. This methodological and interpretive choice provided us with the tools to return to some important Foucauldian textual places, finding explicit or implicit references to Canguilhem – and especially to the “polemical” and “political” problematic of the norm in key moments of theoretical insight and of articulation of new conceptual tools, especially in the analysis of power. Therefore, by following the red thread of the norm in the 1970s, we have identified explicit references to Canguilhem in Abnormal and Discipline and Punish and implicit references to his work in the formulation of the paradigm of normalisation in the first volume of the History of Sexuality (which extends and develops some of the main points of the first two). After having identified these occurrences and showing their importance is far from marginal or secondary,

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604 EW2, 466, 477.
605 Cf. Macherey, De Canguilhem à Foucault.
I have proposed a close reading of Canguilhem’s medicine thesis to understand and articulate the notions of norm, in order to achieve two goals. First, to access the notions of norm (understood as ‘norm of life’) that Foucault could potentially have found in that book, as well as the presuppositions of the notions of normalisation (both in Canguilhem’s analysis of the ‘quantitative hypothesis’ and in his view of a certain standardisation of knowledge and techniques around the eighteenth century) and normativity (as the movement and agency instituting norms and shaping forms of life). Second, to achieve a particularly interpretive goal, namely that reconstructing Canguilhem’s conceptual apparatus in the theoretical context in emerges so as to mobilise it our reading of Foucault.

Bearing in mind our conceptual acquisitions in our reading of Canguilhem, I now propose us to return to the task of reading Foucault and tracing the itineraries of the norm in his work. To do this, this chapter will discuss the problem of the relationship between life and norms through an analysis of Foucault’s reflections on power, showing how it is the relation between these two terms that will define the modern functioning of power and governmental technologies. In this sense, I propose a discussion of the power of the norms, one the one hand, and of the functioning of power as norm, on the other. Understanding the power of the norms and a functioning of power as norm is fundamental to understand the sort of society to which we belong and in relation to which we are constituted as subjects. As Macherey argues: “Ce qui a sans doute le plus préoccupé Foucault, c’est de comprendre comment l’action des normes dans la vie des hommes détermine le type de société auquel ceux-ci appartiennent comme sujets.” This chapter explores precisely some of Foucault’s reflections on these forms of action of the norms upon the life of human beings.

In this chapter, I explore the itinerary of the norm especially from the perspective of power. My goal is to show that, by reading Foucault with Canguilhem, we can find the elements to understand Foucault’s notions of norm and normalisation. And I mean this in two ways: first, as Foucault explains in Abnormal, we find in Canguilhem’s “New Reflections on the Normal and the Pathological” one of the sources of Foucault’s formulation of the idea of ‘a power of normalisation’. Second, we can employ the notion of norm – which we have integrated to our framework in our close reading of The Normal and the Pathological – to describe Foucault’s analysis of power relations in his work of the 1970s. My aim is to show

607 WK, 144.
608 Macherey, De Canguilhem à Foucault, 71.
that the conceptualisation of the norm interacts with two dimensions of Foucault’s work: first, the historical narratives he puts forward regarding the transformation of the way in which power operates in history (and how this transformation is reflected in different institutional supports); second, the level of an epistemological or methodological reconfiguration made possible by the elaboration of the notion of norm.

The historical dimension is clear in Foucault’s description of a series of institutional and social transformations. I will analyse two examples in particular: the dismantling of the experience of the “Great Confinement” in the History of Madness, as well as the disappearance of the “supplice” in Discipline and Punish. These concrete and local historical changes – the first not conceptualised through the notion of norm, which I contend is a later conceptual acquisition of Foucault’s work – point to a general transformation of power, which will be characterised by the advent of “disciplines” in Discipline and Punish and by the transition from a model based on sovereign power to “bio-power”, as Foucault describes it in the first volume of the Will to Knowledge. The transformation of the operations of power in the sense their organisation as a ‘normalising’ governmental technique are part of a historical process that Foucault diagnoses in different moments of his work.

The diagnosis of these transformations in the ways of governing human beings is accompanied by a corresponding shift or reconfiguration of the epistemological and methodological perspective in Foucault’s work. As Gutting explains, Foucault’s conceptualisation is local and punctual, interacting with the specificity of the historical material, which is to say that he theorises “in response to the demands of a specific historical and critical project” and that “the theories devised are not intended as permanent structures, enduring in virtue of their universal truth”. Therefore, concepts, theories and methods are “always subordinated to the tactical needs of the particular analysis at hand. They are not general engines of war that could be deployed against any target. This is why each of Foucault’s books has the air of a new beginning”. For Paul Veyne this sort of transitive mode of creation of concepts and methods through a particular idea of “nominalism”, or which Foucault defined as a “refusal of universals”. In this sense, the

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609 Gutting, The Cambridge Companion to Foucault, 16.
610 Gutting, The Cambridge Companion to Foucault, 4. In addition to this instrumental character, in “The Social Extension of the Norm”, Foucault sees in historical analysis a “way to avoid the sacralisation of theory” (FL, 198).
612 GL, 80. He adds: “I do not say nominalism for a host of reasons, the main one being that nominalism is a very specific and technical conception, practice, and philosophical method”. For a clear
diagnosis of the historical transformations I have just mentioned is accompanied by a theoretical movement which centres power and government around the notion of norm and through this, as I will demonstrate, can be defined as an immanentisation of power.

Before discussing the theoretical framework constituted by the norm (and the way in which it links life and power), let us turn to the historical and contextual terrain in which the articulation of this framework becomes possible. In order to do this, I propose we return to Canguilhem’s On the Normal and the Pathological and, more specifically, to the 1966 addendum, the “New Reflections on the Normal and the Pathological”. In this text, in his discussion of the notions of norm and normativity, Canguilhem shifts from the vital to the domain of society and history; or, as he writes, to the domain of the norm as an “anthropological and cultural phenomenon”. In the “New Reflections” Canguilhem revisits the analysis of the norms in the perspective of human life in a different key.

6.1. Vital and Social Norms

As we have seen, although Canguilhem thinks human experience – including social life – as somehow an expression of (or grounded upon) life and vital dynamics, he is suspicious of any attempt to justify particular social norms by making recourse to the biological as an established or brut fact (refuting therefore the idea that a particular social norm could better reflect an unchanging biological infrastructure than others). On the contrary, in 1943, when discussing physiology – understood as the “crystallisation of habits and constants” which result from temporary but relatively stable solutions given by the living (the human being) to the challenges, questions and threats of the environment – Canguilhem stresses the importance of culture, society and geography. Canguilhem emphasises human plasticity and the flexibility linked to the notion of normativity and the capacity to break and create norms. In human cultures and societies, this plasticity leaves marks in our history as living beings, so that the plurality of forms of life (which are historical, social and cultural), instead of merely and deterministically ‘reflecting’ a physical or geographical milieu, have

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613 NP, 240.
614 NP, 162.
repercussions in terms of a physiological plurality and the way in which physiological constants are established.\textsuperscript{615}

Analysing Quêtelet’s theory of the “average man”, Canguilhem shows how this author interpreted the existence of regularity and anatomic averages concerning human traits, especially height, in an ontological sense.\textsuperscript{616} The statistical frequency of this trait and the existence of the average would be the sign of a positively existing “divine norm”, that is to say some sort of static and pre-existing biological norm.\textsuperscript{617} However, Canguilhem argues, “this is untenable from the human point of view, where social norms interfere with biological laws”.\textsuperscript{618} Inverting the relation proposed by Quêtelet, Canguilhem claims that human regularity is not only a function of varying physiological norms but also of social normativity. As he explains, “In the human species, statistical frequency expresses [traduit] not only vital, but also social normativity. A human trait would not be normal because frequent, but [rather] frequent because normal, that is normative in one given kind of life [genre de vie] in the sense given them by the geographers of the school of Vidal de la Blache”.\textsuperscript{619}

As we can see, Canguilhem here revisits the theme of the situational and conjunctural dimension of the norm from the perspective of human life. In this sense, this situational aspect of the norm and normality appears connected to geography, on the one hand, and to a form of life [genre de vie] which is particular and socially specific, on the other.\textsuperscript{620} Thus, our physiological traits and constants are closely related to the social normativity which expresses itself in different kinds of life. The latter is both social in the full sense of the term, since it is organised around social norms shared by a human group, but also biological inasmuch as it affects the body and physiology of the members of the group. The action of the human social norms extends its sphere of influence to the biology of the human body.\textsuperscript{621} The argument might seem counterintuitive, so let us return to the concrete example of Canguilhem’s discussion of the average.

\textsuperscript{615} NP, 175.
\textsuperscript{616} NP, 158.
\textsuperscript{617} As Canguilhem shows, Quêtelet derives or deduces the norm from the average. His main source in this discussion is Maurice Halbwachs’ book \textit{La théorie de l’homme moyen}.
\textsuperscript{618} NP, 159.
\textsuperscript{619} NP, 160.
\textsuperscript{620} More explicitly: “the differences of cosmic milieu, technical equipment and way of life (…) make the abnormal of today the normal of yesterday” (NP, 174).
\textsuperscript{621} It is important to note here the similarity of this conclusion to Foucault’s claim in the \textit{History of Sexuality}, where man is defined as an animal “whose politics places his existence as a living being into question” (WK, 145). Where Foucault speaks of “politics”, we could think simply think of Canguilhem’s notion of social norm or collective techniques of life. We find, then, the model of a biological life whose
In the case of height in the human species, he argues, we are facing a “phenomenon that is inseparably biological and social. Even if height is a function of the environment, the product of human activity must be seen, in a sense, in the geographical environment. Man is a geographical agent and geography is thoroughly penetrated by history in the form of collective techniques”.

In this passage, one can also note the link between Canguilhem’s initial proposition of “introducing history into life” and the particular role that both the notion of kind of life [genre de vie] and that of “collective technique” play in the development of this proposition in terms of the life of human beings. Introducing history into life – constructing the “histoire du vivant” particular to human beings – means to consider not only vital normativity and the physiological norms that the biological individual institutes in response to sickness and to the questions of environment. It also means to consider the collective responses organised through social norms, which are situated in time and space: there is a human geography of norms and a history of the effects of our normative activity explored in the collective techniques which interfere, affect and intertwine with our vital norms. A consequence of this reflection, which seems clear in Foucault’s work, is that understanding norms means always looking at a particular time and particular space in which they act. We can also note how Canguilhem, developing a theme of his early writings, departs from a deterministic approach (which could have racist consequences) in his approach to this geography of the norm.

If norms are related to particular geographical environments, the environment itself is in turn seen as shaped by human action, for “man is a geographical agent”. The geography organic ingenuity is lost: organic and biological life in human beings is in relation with human norms, techniques and forms of life, which are necessarily social and geographically distributed. The biological human body is always already invested by collective norms of life.

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622 NP, 159
623 NP, 31; see also NP, 85 [62] where he talks about a “histoire du vivant”.
624 See Œ1, 307. Canguilhem clearly fought against the deterministic views of the relation between human being and milieu, such as formulated by Taine. Another theme from his ‘Alainian’ period appears here: the human being is never a reflex or a passive product of exterior conditions. Here we see another reference to Vidal de la Blache’s geographical possibilism. Reacting against a deterministic conception where human characteristics would be fully explained and determined by the natural milieu and inheritance, La Blache thinks that “the natural environment offers possible avenues for human development, the precise one chosen being very much a human decision” (Cloke; Philo; Sadler. Approaching Human Geography, London: Chapman, 1991, 65). See Vidal de la Blache, P. “Les genres de vie dans la géographie humaine”. Annales de Géographie, t. 20, no.112, 1911.
625 This insight is made very clear later in the same chapter of the 1943 medicine thesis, where Canguilhem writes: “Here again the relationship between the biological norms of life and the human environment seems to be both cause and effect of men’s structure and behaviour” (NP, 173).
626 I leave the question regarding the geographical dimension (and sources) of Canguilhem’s work open to future investigation. On a different occasion, I intend to situate the importance of two authors mentioned by Canguilhem: Vidal de la Blache and Maximilien Sorre. Regarding the latter, Canguilhem
of the norm is, then, also a study of the relation between human and social normativity as an active element in the shaping of this environment.\footnote{NP, 161.}

Now, if geography is thoroughly penetrated by history, the same can be said of human physiology in the sense that it is penetrated by collective techniques, by human normative action (intentional or unintentional). To illustrate this idea, Canguilhem mentions Halbwachs’ analysis of life expectancy and the diversity found in human lifespan across different geographical and social contexts. Canguilhem stresses how Halbwachs shows that death is a social phenomenon, linked to work conditions, social standards of hygiene, to a whole series of “collective techniques of hygiene” (or sanitary techniques) that tend to prolong life or “the habits of negligence which result in shortening it”.\footnote{NP, 161.} The average lifespan, therefore, is not the biological normal, but the “socially normative lifespan”.\footnote{NP, 161.} In Halbwachs’ perspective, lifespan would even vary within a same national society, according to the different “levels of life” of different classes, occupations, etc. Moreover, in Canguilhem’s analysis of phenomena such as height and lifespan and the variation of its averages across societies, we see his ‘Alainian’ heritage of the resistance to the brut or accomplished fact: no average designates a sort of transcendent norm of life itself, but rather the normative activity and the collective techniques and experiences that human beings collectively apply to themselves.

In collective techniques we find, once again, the experience of vital polarity, and the human activity that addresses what is experienced as negative.\footnote{NP, 161.} It is the position of value and the activity of creating norms that Canguilhem finds in his analysis of averages. As he explains, “when we speak of an average life, in order to show it growing gradually, we link it to the action that man, taken collectively, exercises on himself. It is in this sense that Halbwachs deals with death as a social phenomenon, believing that the age at which death writes: “Certainly what interests Sorre above all is man’s ecology, the explanation of the problems of human settlement. But in the end, as all these problems lead to problems of adaptation, we see how a geographer’s work is of great interest for a methodological essay on biological norms. Sorre notes very clearly the importance of the cosmopolitanism of the human species for a theory of the relative instability of physiological constants (…). The physiological constant is the expression of a physiological optimum in given conditions among which we must bear in mind those which the living being in general, and \textit{homo faber} in particular, give themselves” (NP, 170-171).

\footnote{NP, 161.}{\footnote{NP, 161.}{\footnote{NP, 161.}{In his reading of Halbwachs’, Canguilhem sees in the different “collective techniques” or “negligence” evaluations regarding life. Here we find elements for thinking of a ‘care of life’ which designates the valorisation life, which is a theme that will reappear in Foucault.}}}
occurs largely from working and hygienic conditions, attention paid to fatigue and diseases, in short, from social as much as physiological conditions”.  

According to this ‘geographical’ approach to the vital and the social norm proposed by Canguilhem, in human beings, biological and physiological facts and averages are must be considered in their relation to kinds of life [genres de vie], levels of life [niveaux de vie] and collective techniques which express the action that we collectively exercise upon ourselves. Here we have a first concept of a bio-technique – concept that, as I stressed earlier, Foucault will propose in his 1980s lectures. In Canguilhem’s proposition, the techniques that invest, interact and, to a great extent shape life, are collective: it is the work upon itself that the cosmopolitan human species effects in different ways and in different contexts. It is in this sense that our life offers a certain plasticity even in the physiological sense.  

The diagnosis of this plasticity, however, presupposes an analysis of different groups – that is to say, this plasticity in the functioning of human biological life is, for Canguilhem, group-based. Thus, as an “expression of human biological normativity”, he writes, it is interesting to analyse the “variations” of physiological “themes from group to group, depending on the types and levels of life, as related to life’s ethical and religious attitudes, in short collective norms of life”. In short, in the 1943 medicine thesis, Canguilhem identifies the importance of social factors in shaping vital norms, but seems to suggest that studying these vital norms means also understanding the normative action that human beings exercise upon themselves through techniques as factors of human vital normative activity. Thus, if the social is fundamental in the understanding of plasticity and variation of biological norms in human beings, it is because it is a mode of being of this biological reality, it expresses the vital in its own particular way. In this sense, rather than opposition, we find social kinds of life and collective techniques applied to life as a way in which life acts upon itself through man.

631 NP, 161.  
632 See HS, final lecture.  
633 “If we admit man’s functional plasticity, linked in him to vital normativity, we are not dealing with either a total or instantaneous malleability or a purely individual one. To propose, with all suitable reservations, that man has physiological characteristics related to his activity, does not mean allowing every individual to believe that he will be able to change his glycemia or basal metabolism by Coué method [of autosuggestion]” (NP, 174).  
634 NP, 165 [140]. I believe that the English translation of this particular passage introduces a change in emphasis in terms of the agent of variation of norms. In the original, and here we can hear the echo of Alain’s teaching, it is due to different ethical (and religious) prises de position that we can speak of variations of norms: “en relation avec des prises de position éthiques ou religieuses relativement à la vie, bref des normes collectives de vie”.

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Foucault captured this relation when referring to the concept, not as a negation of life but rather as a form of life, in such a way that it is an integral part of the process and the errors of life: it is vital. In the same way, Canguilhem’s procedure is to refer human biological norms to the power of collective and social normative activity, naturalising this activity, conceiving it as an expression as one of the possible ways in which life is in human reality. So, one can say that Canguilhem denaturalises human physiological norms (constructionist position), showing that they are far from an accomplished fact deprived of history, and re-naturalises (in a slightly different sense) social activity showing that it is inherent to human life, and should be counted as one of the normative forces shaping human physiology. If Canguilhem refers in 1943 to a sociological force acting upon physiology, it is not to reduce physiology to sociology, but to stress that, in the realm of human vital phenomena and averages, one is always dealing with phenomena that are both social and biological; perhaps one could say that in this sense he sees the social as constitutive of human biology.

Human biological plasticity is then related to a geography of the norm and to the social and historical variety of collective techniques. This approach, Canguilhem explains, considers plasticity as fundamentally ‘group-based’, and it presupposes therefore a comparative physiology and pathology:

As far as man and his permanent physiological characteristics are concerned, only a comparative human physiology and pathology – in the sense that there exists a comparative literature – of various ethnic, ethical or religious, and technical groups and subgroups, which would take into account life’s intricacy and its kinds and social levels, could furnish a precise answer to our hypotheses.

The variation of forms of life in the biological sense is intertwined with ethical, technical and religious experiences. All these experiences are readable in human physiology. In this sense, the normal would be in relation to this situated normative activity of human beings which is both vital and social. Technical and ethical experiences of the norm intervene in physiological constants – and here we find a striking example of what I have called the power of the norm and its transformative action upon human life. As Canguilhem explains:

In short, physiology would be only one sure and precise method for recording and standardising the functional freedoms acquired or rather progressively mastered by man. If we can speak of normal man as

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635 EW2, 475.
636 NP, 163 [138]. Here, it is important to highlight the “intrication de la vie et des genres et niveaux sociaux de vie”.

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determined by the physiologist, it is because normative men exist for whom it is normal to break norms and establish new ones [faire craquer les normes et d’en instituer de nouvelles].

The illustration provided by Canguilhem comes from the work of Laubry and Brosse on the physiological effects of religious discipline. According to Canguilhem, Laubry and Brosse show how religious discipline allows the Hindu yogi an almost full mastery of the functions of vegetative life. As they explain:

The mastery is such that it succeeds in regulating the peristaltic and antiperistaltic movements and using the anal and vesical sphincters in every possible way [à l’usage en tous sense du jeu des sphincters], thus abolishing the physiological distinction between smooth and striated muscle systems. This mastery abolishes even the relative autonomy of vegetative life.

Religious and ethical attitudes [prise de position] are fundamentally related to social norms, which vary according to different human choices and values. The case of the yogi is an extreme example of the power which human norms have over that which, in the human being, seems more natural – the biological norms and constants of the body and physiology. Not only does the case of the yogi exemplify the power of the norm in terms of the human activity in shaping its own life, through vital and social normativity. It also reveals that our normative power also consists in overcoming or breaking [faire craquer] existing norms. As Laubry and Brosse show, the simultaneous “recording of pulse, respiration, electrocardiogram and the measurement of basal metabolism have allowed one to establish that mental concentration” and a particular practice of breathing allows action upon other functions, producing “accelerated heart rhythm, modification of the electrocardiogram: low generalised voltage, disappearance of waves, infinitesimal fibrillation on the isoelectric line, reduced basal metabolism”.

For Canguilhem, to “obtain a change in pulse rhythm from 50 to 150, an apnea of 15 minutes, an almost total suppression of cardiac contraction, certainly amounts to breaking [faire craquer] physiological norms”. Moreover, this example of the normative action upon life leads Laubry and Brosse to conclude that in human physiology, “the will seems to act as a (...) power of regulation and order”. And Canguilhem concludes: “In short, to consider the average values of human physiological constants as the expression

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637 NP, 164-165 [140].
639 NP, 165 [141].
640 NP, 165.
641 NP, 165-166.
642 NP, 166. Another interesting example that Canguilhem mentions is Porak’s work showing how collective forms or kinds of life have a significant impact in “the curves of diuresis and temperature, pulse and respiration” (NP, 167).
of vital collective norms would only amount to saying that the human race, in inventing kinds of life, invents physiological behaviours at the same time”.

By revealing the social and cultural grounds for physiological variations, then, Canguilhem demonstrates the importance of social normativity for understanding human physiology and its plasticity. In 1943, however, Canguilhem seems not to discuss the specificity of how norms function in society; rather, he seems to be exploring the effects of human social norms upon physiological constants, showing that these physiological constants a result or crystallisation of processes of habituation. By showing the relativity of certain aspects of anatomic and physiological norms, he aims at challenging a certain idea of physiology as an accomplished fact, revealing the “physiological significance of functional constants interpreted as habitual norms of life”. In this sense, Canguilhem’s renewed idea of physiology proposes that “functional constants are habitual norms,” presupposing that “what habit has made, habit unmakes and remakes”.

Before we continue our discussion of Canguilhem’s view of social norms, allow me to briefly note the importance of this reflection on the role of technique in human plasticity for a reading of Foucault. I believe that here, in the articulation of the biological and the collective techniques, we find a new and fruitful interpretive viewpoint to look at Foucault’s ideas of biopower and techne tou biou or biotechniques discussed in the Hermeneutics of the Subject. In Canguilhem’s analysis of the power of the norm over human life – and the social and collective techniques as factor to be integrated in the history of man as living being – we find the elements for understanding how, under biopolitics, biological life always presupposes a history of social norms that act upon it and shape it: biopower and the

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643 NP, 175.
644 NP, 174.
645 NP, 169. In this sense both physiology and pathology are linked to education (“functional pathology” is “intimately connected to education”). The socialisation in the framework of certain cultural norms of behaviour can generate future pathologies; on the other hand, since what habit makes, it can unmake and remake, therapeutic action would take the form of a re-education. “As the consequence of a sensory, active, emotional education badly done or not done, it urgently calls for ‘re-education’” (NP, 166). It is interesting to note here the possible parallels between this idea and Foucault’s (and Hadot’s) discussion of the ancient philosophical schools, situated between the care of the self and learning, norms of behaviour and ideas and doctrines, playing a medical function. See CS, 54-55.
646 I am not trying to suggest here that the role Canguilhem attributes to technique in the discussion of human physiological plasticity is the theoretical ground which Foucault employed in order to connect biopower and biotechniques; my suggestion is that in this Canguilhemian theme we find interpretive tools to look at these two aspects of Foucault’s work. My claim here concerns a philosophical interpretation of Foucault with Canguilhem, and not the ‘intellectual history of Foucault’s thought.
governmental technologies it proposes could be classified under the rubric of these collective techniques that act and invest human biology. If this notion of collective techniques and the geographical concept of *genres de vie* allows us to understand how society shapes life through norms, this same notion, when understood from the perspective of *habitation* provide us with more conceptual tools to think of the *techniques of the self*, especially if we consider the importance of the ancient philosophical schools in Foucault’s discussion of these techniques. It was always in relation to others, to the school, that the ancients would take care of themselves and shape their lives. The school provided a framework of shared, collective techniques, and, as in Canguilhem’s example, of ethical discipline and *prise de position*. In both cases, life and norms are connected through a social technique. Antonella Cutro also highlighted this relation between technique and life emphasising the link between “la grille politico-épistémologique des technologies politiques et plus particulièrement du gouvernement des vivants ; et le mouvement morphogénétique que les techniques du soi amorcent dans la subjectivité”. She shows that this the political technology over life and the techniques of the self are two modes of a technical relation to life. As she explains : “En effet, Foucault s’intéresse à l’aspect technique du rapport entre les vivants et la régulation sociale”. The two poles therefore express a same line, that of a technique de gouvernement des vivants”. Thus, technique is both the tool to think disciplinary and biopolitical intervention and the processes that one applies upon oneself in the *techniques of the self*; both constitute correlative ways to think of the historical ways of shaping life and its norms. In the latter, however, one would speak of a self-government through the norm.

Let us now turn to the analysis of the specific action of norms in society, which will be the object of Canguilhem’s 1966 addendum to the *Normal and the Pathological*. In this text, Canguilhem proposes an investigation on the functioning of norms in society, as a means to further clarify the ways in which vital and organic norms operate.

### 6.2. Social Norm and Normalisation in the “New Reflections”

If, as we have seen, different forms of life produce different physiological norms, social norms are not univocal and homogeneous. Plurality, plasticity and variety in relation to

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647 HS, 134.
648 HS, 113.
650 Cutro, *Technique et vie*, 83.
651 Cutro, *Technique et vie*, 85.
norms also exist within each society. If vital norms are polemical in their relation to the world, social norms are polemical in the sense that, within a same group or society, there can be plural, conflicting norms. As Judith Butler claims in *Frames of War*, in society, it would “be a mistake to understand the operation of norms as deterministic”, for schemes of norms depend of contingent power relations in a society which hosts conflicting norms.652

Differently from what happens in an organism, “where there is no divergence, no distance, no delay between rule and regulation”,653 in human societies “rules must be represented, learned, remembered and applied”.654 As we have seen previously, there is a difference between the social organisation and the vital organism. Moreover, as Canguilhem shows, in order to identify the “social composition” with the organism in the strict sense of the term, “we should be able to speak of a society’s needs and norms as one speaks of an organism’s vital needs and norms, that is unambiguously”.655 Canguilhem exemplifies this “unambiguous” character by showing that the vital norms and needs of a lizard or a stickleback in their habitat are expressed “in the fact that these animals are very natural living beings in this habitat”.656 In society, however, it is enough that one individual question and challenge the norms (and the needs) of a society to reveal that “these needs and norms are not those of the whole society”.657 Social norms are polemical and are in conflict and dispute – for the “parts” and the sort of “whole” constituted by a society are different from the way those terms apply to the organism, to the extent that the former is the seat of conflicting normative forces and projects.658

653 NP, 250.
654 NP, 250.
655 NP, 256.
656 NP, 256. Which, as we have seen, does not mean that their life form is simply part of the realm of *fait brut*, since every form of life is the contingent result of the dynamic struggle and position of value of life in the world. Canguilhem’s comparison here seems to suggest that the organism positions itself as a unity in the relation to the environment – one could recall the unity of experience that he thought as one of the main aspects of the process of becoming ill. In this sense, the organism is a sort of centre of activity and evaluations. In society, conflict and struggle are also internal: it would be difficult – and perhaps impossible – to speak of the same kind of unity in the social context.
657 NP, 256.
658 Additionally, Canguilhem suggests that given the sort of assemblage that societies are we could use the image of the “machine” – rather than that of the organism – to define it (NP, 252). Society develops new parts and functions to address different and new problems, and it has the capacity to assimilate and integrate new functions, bodies or “organs”. This metaphor is also relevant if we consider the discussion of technology that I proposed in the previous chapter. It is also important to note that normalisation is a concept which according to Canguilhem has a technical and industrial origin (standardisation of parts and designs), applying it to society could be seen as way to differentiate the latter from the organism.
For Canguilhem, then, society is the “seat of restrained dissent and latent antagonisms”.

I have characterised this view, which emphasises the difference between the normative dynamics of the social with regards to the biological, by pointing to the plurality of norms and normative foci in dispute in society. Social norms presuppose the possibility of something which is nonconforming, and therefore of different norms and normative schemes in conflict. As Le Blanc puts it “Le conflit des normes dans le champ social est lié à leur caractère agonistique. La guerre sociale est d’abord pensée comme une guerre des normes. Cette guerre des normes doit être comprise comme une guerre des valeurs qui sous-tendent les normes”. In this permanent war of norms, the dominant normative and normalising force today may not be the same that played this role in the past and or as those that will contingently play this role in the future. To use Butler’s words, “normative schemes are interrupted by one another, they emerge, and they fade depending on broader operations of power.”

With that in mind, how can one talk about the existence of a power of norms in society? How do norms act? How are they formed and enacted? It is partly as a response to these problems that Canguilhem, in the 1966 “New Reflections”, applies the framework of norms and normativity to society, by putting forward a historical and sociological claim concerning science, knowledge and technology. It is in this context that Canguilhem inaugurates a singular approach to the problem of normalisation in society.

As Canguilhem explains, between the French Revolution and the nineteenth century, a series of significant reforms were taking place. As he claims, “like pedagogical reform, hospital reform expresses a demand for rationalisation which also appears in politics as it appears in the economy under the effects of nascent industrial mechanisation and which finally has since then been called normalisation”.

For Canguilhem, the sort of relation to the norm and normativity expressed in the idea of normalisation is a “specifically anthropological and cultural experience”. As we have seen with the problem of therapeutics and technique, not only is the fact of being alive necessarily a position of value or an evaluation. This position of evaluation also presupposes the polarised activity of a life that is not indifferent to its conditions of existence, nor to the

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659 NP, 256.
660 Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 82.
661 Butler, Frames of War, 4.
662 NP, 237.
663 NP, 244.
possibility of its own annihilation, to its own fragility or precariousness. In this sense, Canguilhem writes in 1966:

Today, then, as twenty years ago, I am still running the risk of trying to establish the fundamental meaning of the normal by means of a philosophical analysis of life understood as activity of opposition to inertia and indifference. Life tries to win against death in all the senses of the verb to win, foremost in the sense of winning in gambling.664

In Canguilhem’s view, life accepts the risk and the consequences of its gamble against death and reacts against inertia and stagnation. In this interplay with the environment, Canguilhem explained in his medicine thesis, “indifference is abnormal”, 665 for “life is far removed from such an indifference to the conditions which are made for it; life is polarity”.666 This is why there is no “biological indifference”.667

In the case of technique and therapeutics, human action expresses and translates this polarised activity (against indifference), by creating solutions – which, as we have seen, are contingent and precarious – to the experience of negativity. In this sense, technical creativity is a sort a response of a polarised life which tries to address the negative aspects of its experience in the world, by creating solutions, tools and ways of doing that somehow overcome these experiences of limitation, hindrance and restriction of possibilities. Technique expresses both the evaluation of a certain situation and the normative response to it. In the case of therapy, the problem posed by pain provokes and call for a sort of action that can address, remedy or attenuate an experience of a life interrupted in its unfolding by a caesura, a discontinuity introduced by suffering.668 Speaking in abstract terms, in the case of therapy, technique expresses a negative experience and a polarised response, a normative intention of overcoming this negativity through a technical invention, intervention or an action aiming at the transformation of a certain reality and its conditions of existence.

Now, the same is valid for the process of normalisation in society. Here, a collectively constituted normative intention acts upon variety and difference experienced and perceived not as neutral or indifferent facts, but rather as something “negatively qualified”.669 Thus, as we have seen, it was the event of pain and suffering in disease that generated the ‘call’ for

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664 NP, 236.
665 NP, 98.
666 NP, 128.
667 NP, 129.
668 For Canguilhem, I believe, this experience is paradigmatic for thinking technical action, without losing sight of the specificity of the collective and social techniques.
669 NP, 239.
rectification, recovery or help and that, in this way, produced the physiological and existential “awe” which originates science and speculation. In the same way, it is a state negatively experienced – the state experienced as abnormal or as an infraction – that “provides the rule the occasion to be rule”. In the case of society, we cannot say that we find something similar to the “physiological awe” of disease for the individual, since norms that are experienced negatively by certain groups or sectors of society could be experienced positively by others. What is relevant for the analysis of social norms and normalisation is that something is experienced, classified or seen as negative (by a certain group or a certain normative force in society). In the case of the reforms analysed by Canguilhem, the variety and simultaneity of forms and solutions to certain technical problems or, differently phrased, the plurality of irreconcilable practices is seen as something with a negative value. The variety of conflicting designs of the parts for building railways is one of the examples Canguilhem uses: here the counterproductive nature of diversity and the problem to connect different railways, for example, would be seen as negative. In the realm of human activity – forms and ways of doing or performing certain tasks – variety and divergent forms can be seen as negative, and therefore as deviation requiring orthopaedic correction. This reality needs to be negatively qualified – or, to use Butler’s expression once again, “framed” in such a way that it allows for corrective action. As Canguilhem explains: “The concept of right (…) qualifies what offers resistance to its application as twisted, crooked or awkward”.

In this regard, language and especially grammar furnish “the prime materials for the reflection on norms”. In contrast with the Ordinance Viller-Cotterêts, which established

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670 NP, 239.
671 Think, for example, of the standardisation of factory production in Taylorism or Fordism, where we find a normalisation of the production process through technical solutions as the assembly line and the highly specialised division of labour. There is a clear normative intention at work, which is the economic optimisation of times and movements in the productive process, maximising productivity and efficiency, maximising the forms of extraction of energy from the body of the worker. An ‘inefficient’ use of the body such as was found in pre-industrial crafts is seen by the capitalist as a negative reality that should be addressed by technology, by a technical action and organisation of space guided by a clear normative intention. However, this normative intention is at odds with the worker’s own experience of the factory system. It is this very division of labour and the reduction of the scope of activity – as well as of body performances – that are experienced as negative values by the worker.
672 NP, 239. One could differentiate here the “physiological awe” (which Canguilhem develops in the first part of his thesis) and the socially and culturally “awkward”; although they both appear as something negative and requiring technical action, the causes for these experiences of negativity are very different, as well as the source of normativity that will act upon them. As we will see with Foucault, in the second case, technical action presupposes a normalising power.
673 NP, 244.
674 The Ordinance Viller-Cotterêts was a law created in the time of Francis I of France, in 1539, which established that the French language should be used in all official and legal acts.
the French language as the official language to be used by the state and which presupposed punishment and legal sanction, Canguilhem examines the constitution of grammar around the same time and afterwards. Differently from the law and the pain of legal sanctions, grammar operates through norms, which means establishing a reference and devaluing certain existing forms of expression which are not in accordance with it, “the reference defining mistakes in terms of divergences and difference”. Even forms rooted in a long history of popular use of language are seen as “awkward” and divergent. Grammar is not a legal system – nor a vital one in the strict sense of the term – but rather a “system of regulation of the use of language”, which presupposes the possibility of different usages to be corrected. Therefore, in grammar is not a matter of an interdiction of speech, of the distinction between speech and silence, but of ways of positive use of language: the forms which diverge are brought to the interior of the regulated space of grammar. The norm is applied to language with an aim at establishing patterns unifying forms and modalities of the use of language: it applies a ‘rule’ to language, normalising and standardising it. In grammatical terms, there is no transgression of full exteriority to the norm, but rather something which diverges from the norm but still relates to it, that is to say, something that is within the normative space of grammar and is experienced as something that must be corrected, rectified, referred to a unified standard. In a word, something which is not yet normal – while at the same time being within a normative (or, here, normalising) space.

Now, by looking at the development of grammar, Canguilhem notes that the normative or normalising force at work in this process is consistent and indeed linked to other processes of standardisation taking place around the same time. Thus, he concludes that “in the seventeenth century the grammatical norm reflects a political norm:

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675 Here, again, it is interesting to recall Butler’s notion of frame: to devaluate a certain practice or agent means to frame it in such a way that it appears as a deviance to be corrected. In this sense, Butler’s notion of frame captures the way in which social norms operate for Canguilhem: they must represent a reality which precedes them as deserving of correction. See Butler, Frames of War.
676 NP, 244.
677 NP, 244.
678 See NP, 239. It would be interesting to analyse the differences between this conception of the power of the norm in grammar and the notion of silencing that Foucault puts forward in the first preface of the History of Madness, as well as to notions of other texts on language and literature of the same period. If the ‘early Foucault’ found in the interdiction of language a model for thinking the modes of exercise of power in our culture, Canguilhem looks at grammar as a way to articulate a different notion (normalisation).
679 In this example, the two forces I have previously distinguished, the normative (capacity to create norms; source of norms) and the normalising (action of correction and of reduction to a certain space of norms), converge in the sociological sense: that which establishes norms coincides with the agent that implements a process of normalisation.
administrative centralisation for the benefit of royal power”. Developing this continuity between local fields of application of the norm and normalisation, Canguilhem seems to be setting the grounds for what Foucault will later call a “normalising society”. In this sense, Canguilhem adds: “in terms of normalisation there is no difference between the birth of grammar in France in the seventeenth century and the establishing of the metric system at the end of the eighteenth”. Indeed, this genealogy or ‘sociology’ of normalisation points to the unity of a normative project which emerges around that time and is applied to a whole series of domains (and entails the creation of a set of institutions): from language and grammatical norms to sanitary and public hygiene norms, passing through a general standardisation of designs and parts in industrial production. Canguilhem’s examples go from the normal school (schools to ‘form’ teachers) to normal medicine, passing through the standardisation of railway gauges.

Indeed, according to Canguilhem, in this historico-sociological analysis of normalisation, “Richelieu and Napoleon” are but “successive instruments of the same collective demand,” which “began with grammatical norms and ended with morphological norms of men and horses for national defence, passing through industrial and sanitary norms”. The latter are particularly relevant for our analysis, since they seem to be in close relation with certain early developments of Foucault’s work which will lead to the constitution of the biopolitical paradigm. In a certain sense, they already express one of the political and governmental uses of the norm by Foucault, focusing on the population. As Canguilhem explains:

“In the eighteenth century] the definition of sanitary norms assumes that, from the political point of view, attention is paid to the health of the populations, considered statistically, to the healthiness of conditions of public hygiene.”

680 NP, 244.
681 “A normalising society is the historical outcome of a technology of power cantered on life” (WK, 144).
682 NP, 244.
683 NP, 237.
684 NP, 245.
685 NP, 245.
686 As we have seen, important biopolitical themes such as the medicalisation of society and politicisation of medicine, as well as the concern with policing the health of the population were already formulated in Foucault’s 1963 Birth of the Clinic, which Canguilhem quotes in the “New Reflections”.
687 We could say that both BC and the 1976 text “The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century” (EW3, 90-105; DE2, text 168) share and extend Canguilhem’s diagnosis.
existence, and uniform dissemination of preventive and curative treatments perfected by medicine.\textsuperscript{688}

Let us attempt to summarise Canguilhem’s historical and sociological hypothesis. The standardisation of teaching practices, the establishment of a normalised grammar, the formation of industrial and technical standards capable of optimising and unifying productive processes and, finally, the definition of sanitary norms capable of intervening and regulating the health of populations based on statistical grounds – all point to a general historical process of normalisation that takes place around the French Revolution and is extended, throughout the nineteenth century, to the present.

Canguilhem conceptualised the relation between society and norms in two different ways. First, in the 1943 thesis, he reflected upon the social experience of human normativity, by situating collective techniques, ethical and religious attitude, cultural choices and \textit{genres de vie} as one of the forces shaping the natural history of human beings, that is to say, as an active force in the history of human physiology, its plasticity and variations across different groups and historical contexts. Thus, by showing that physiological and biological constants in human beings are linked to a process of education and habituation, Canguilhem indirectly shows that our social activity is natural and immanent in life, that it is intertwined with it, and that our history as a species in the biological sense cannot be separated from our social and technical activity. Through a geographical approach to the norm, making reference to the “French school of human geography”, Canguilhem underlined the fundamental contingency of collective norms and \textit{genres de vie}, claiming that “functional constants are habitual norms”\textsuperscript{689} and that, inasmuch as their product of habit, they can be unmade, transgressed and replaced by other norms and other habits.

In the 1966 “New Reflections”, Canguilhem revisits this relation between norms and society. Now, however, he aims at analysing the specificity of social norms and their action in social life, from what we could call a sociological perspective – which brackets (without ignoring) the vital terrain in which social life takes place. It is as if Canguilhem proposed us to shift perspectives: in 1943, he invited his reader to challenge the idea of human physiology as \textit{fait brut}, showing how the contingency and power of human action and norms leaves its marks in the history of human biological life (form anatomy to functional constants, from physiology to pathology). Having done that, showing that life and social activity can only be separated in thought and analysis, but exist together in the living being, he invites us to look

\textsuperscript{688} NP, 245.
\textsuperscript{689} NP, 169.
at the social and collective norms from the perspective of life. In 1966, the perspective is that of society. Although Canguilhem claims that his goal is to “clarify the specific meaning of vital norms by comparing them to social norms” and that “it is with the organism in view that” he allows himself “some forays into society”, he ends up proposing a sociological model of the action of the norm. If from the perspective of life, the normal living being is not the one fixed in normalised or sedimented norms, but the one who is able to be normative and break or institute norms, what does it mean to speak of the normal in society? How do social norms operate in history? How can we think the specificity of social normativity? Just like in 1943 the analysis of the norms of human life was situated in time and space, Canguilhem proposes an analysis of social norms within a particular historical process, which he characterised as a general process of normalisation. In the following chapter, I will show how it is precisely this reading of the social power of the norm that Foucault will incorporate to his own analysis.

If the notion of vital normativity focused on the experimental and creative dimension of norms, on the processes of emergence of new norms the emerged from the experience of negativity and illness, the social analysis of the norm focuses on the production of normality through forms of standardisation of social practices. Through the analysis of social norms, Canguilhem shows us both how the normal is a by-product of historical processes of normalisation in local contexts, and the processes of fixation of norms that take place in society. What I will try to show in what follows is that this model of the social action of the norm understood as normalisation will play an important role in the reconfiguration of Foucault’s analysis of power. As we will see, Foucault will expand Canguilhem’s diagnosis of the normalisation which takes place in social life and will use that to explore the ways in which the body and biological life are framed in modern political practices, constituting a general framework of the politicisation and government of life. The question that, for now, remains still open is – what is the place for normativity understood as the activity of challenging norms and instituting new norms in the context of a general normalisation of the forms of life?

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690 “The meaning of the concepts of norm and normal in the social sciences, sociology, ethnology, economics, involve research which in the end – whether it deals with social types, criteria of maladjustement to the group, consumer needs and behaviour, preference systems – tends towards the question of the relations between normality and generality” (NP, 235).
Chapter 7

Foucault and the “Archaeology of Normalising Power”

In “Structuralism and Poststructuralism”, Foucault associates Canguilhem to a tradition concerned with the project of a critical history of reason (which he links to the Enlightenment). In Canguilhem’s analysis of these local developments of the norm, we can precisely find local points of rationalisation of practices, understood from the perspective of standardisation. It is precisely to these local, regional processes of rationalisation, as well as to the general historical process of normalisation that Foucault will refer in Abnormal. In this chapter I will show how, in this lecture course, Foucault’s presents his own formulation of a model of positive power in a relation of continuity to Canguilhem’s diagnosis – and, at the same time, as a shift of this model in terms of a further politicisation.

In the 8 January lecture, Foucault proposes to explore a topic that will be transversal throughout his work: that of the interconnection and mutual implication of effects of power and effects of truth. This investigation extends his first lecture course at the Collège de France, The Lectures on the Will to Know, where Foucault proposes to undertake the task of writing a political history of the truth and of the violence, struggle, conflict and forms of domination it presupposes.

The object Foucault analyses in 1975 in order to explore these relations between truth and power will be the field of juridical and political practice and discourse, and more precisely, the formation of institutional practices ‘qualified to express the truth’ or, one could say, to produce it in relation to the practice of justice. More specifically, in the beginning of the lecture course, Foucault looks at the articulation of two domains of expertise which begin to interact, sometimes agonistically, namely the domain of medicine and medical power and the domain of the application of justice, that is to say both the power to judge and the administration of punishments. In this point of contact Foucault analyses the formation of the requirement for “expert psychiatric opinion”, which reflects a transformation in the application of punishment and in the functioning of the power to punish. The expert psychiatric opinion, its interference and insertion in the juridical apparatus marks a process of transforming or displacing “the point of application of punishment from the offense

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691 EW2, 439-440. The same theme appears in “Life: Experience and Science” (EW2, 469).
692 A, 11.
693 LWK, 4. In A, however, power will be characterised less as violence and more as normalising action.
defined by law to criminality evaluated from a psychologico-moral point of view”. In this process, therefore, the juridical mechanism is extended to faults and processes in the individual that are not in themselves illegal, but which resemble the individual’s crime “before he has committed it”. Power is exercised not only in the particular point of application of penalty, but in a whole “para-legal” and “para-pathological series” which is concerned the individuals’ life story, conduct and behaviour, with the hidden or latent aspects of his instincts, and his character traits. Medico-legal opinion “does not address itself to delinquents or innocents or to those who are sick or well”. Rather, it addresses itself to the “category of dangerous and abnormal individuals”, distributed in “a field of gradations from the normal to the abnormal”, to whom society organises a unified response. Foucault thus shows how this notion of normality comes to occupy an important place in the technologies of punishment. It is interesting to note that, as Canguilhem has shown, the concept of the normal in society is linked to a historical process of normalisation which takes place across different institutions and social practices. Foucault extends this insight to the analysis of this new medico-legal complex. Foucault’s thesis suggests that this process was also important in the formation of the notion of an abnormal individual, whom society ought to punish not necessarily because of his crimes, but of his personality, his drives, his morbid nature. Additionally, normality is defined according to a distribution within a spectrum, a field of “gradation”, which echoes Canguilhem’s analysis of what we called the “quantitative thesis” and the political implications we have discussed. According to this quantitative view of the normal, each transgression of the norm is seen not as a potentially creative focus, but as a deviation to be addressed, corrected and reconducted back to the pre-existing norm, to the preconceived limits of variation that constitute the normal. Beyond criminal infraction, what is under surveillance is the individual’s distance from the norm and normality.

Following Foucault’s account, the practice of judgement and punishment now integrates a category of “mental abnormality”, which goes beyond the moment of infraction of the law and beyond crime itself. What takes place with the formation of the psychological-penal technologies of power (based on a general attention to the social danger embodied by abnormal individuals) is the “extension of punitive power to something which is not a breach

694 A, 18.
695 A, 19.
696 A, 41.
697 A, 42.
698 One can refer this notion of “gradation from the normal to the abnormal” to Canguilhem’s analysis of the “quantitative thesis” and the political implications, which I analysed in the previous chapter.
in the law”. What is being established is “a general corpus of reflected techniques for the transformation of individuals”.

Analogously to what we have seen in Canguilhem’s analysis of grammar, which regulated the use of language beyond prohibition, with the introduction of the category of dangerous and abnormal individuals Foucault is pointing to an extension of power and regulation to something that was by its nature and until then below or beyond the reach of the law. In the case of grammar, the point was not the interdiction of language or the legal prescription of the use of a certain language under the threat of legal sanction, but the extension of rules and norms to the use and performance of language. What was at stake was the inclusion and regulation of certain forms of expression in relation to a norm and a normative project – which, in its turn, entailed a standardisation of the existing use of language. Grammatical errors presuppose an employment of language which can be corrected, and a norm that presides this correction, rather than a silencing of language. In the same way, in Foucault’s analysis in Abnormal, what takes place is also a case of extension, rather than proscription. Juridical sanction now gives place to a different technology, concerned less with the transgression of law in crime (or nor only with that), but also with a series of conditions which make this transgression possible, conditions that should be addressed by new “institutions of medico-legal surveillance”. This new technology, which takes charge of the individuals’ life story (looking for symptoms of his abnormality) and monitors the contents of his representations and the dynamics of his drives and desires, expresses itself in the growing importance of psychological expertise in juridical practice. This technology is primarily concerned with norms of behaviour: “the irregular forms of behaviour that were put forward as the crime’s cause and point of origin”. The individual conduct will be medicalised and situated in relation to a norm: which now must extend its power over his instincts, impulses and drives. This expansion of the power to punish is accompanied by an extension and growth of psychiatric power. Echoing his reflections in the History of Madness, Foucault explains that the “social danger” previously associated with crime is now “codified within psychiatry as illness”.

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699 A, 18.
700 A, 18.
701 A, 40.
702 A, 16.
703 See A, 169, 150 and 139, respectively.
704 A, 119.
In this new juridical technology, Foucault situates the emergence of a different form of power, which invests the “dangerous individual” — that is to say, the individual now considered in his potentially criminal nature, and seen as abnormal and pathological. However, this new form of power mobilises both the judge and the doctor, is neither juridical nor specifically medical, but something that emerges in the articulation of different institutions. Foucault refers to this new form of power as “power of normalisation”. Its main form of action mobilises a technique of normalisation, which situates the individual in relation to the norm (rather than in relation to the effective transgression of the law), monitoring possible deviations, while also situating him in a field which is both of sanction and correction. In this sense, here we encounter that relation between pathology and education that Canguilhem underlined. As Foucault shows in *Discipline and Punish*, penalty is an almost pedagogical process, one which presupposes the acquisition of new habits and dispositions that will operate a reform in the individual. As Foucault explains in *Abnormal*, this technique of normalisation consists in “singling out the individual; taking responsibility for those who are accessible to penal sanction in order to cure or reform them”. What takes place is a medicalisation of criminals and the formation of a pathology of criminal conduct. It is precisely this technique of normalisation — that in the case of juridical and medical setting “will take responsibility for the dangerous individual” — that Foucault establishes as the object of his investigation in the 1975 lecture course. As he puts it:

I would like to study this appearance, this emergence of techniques of normalisation and the powers linked to them by taking as a principle, as an initial hypothesis (...) that these techniques of normalisation, and the powers of normalisation linked to them, are not simply the effect of the combination of medical knowledge and judicial power, of their composition or the

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705 A, 42.
706 NP, 166.
707 DP, 205, 211. An analysis of the prison as a dispositif of habituation also appears in DP, 238.
708 A, 24. “And finally, in another circular from the post-war period, from the fifties (...), psychiatrists are asked to answer (...) whether the individual is dangerous. Second question: Is he accessible to penal sanction? Third question: Can he be cured or reformed? You see, then, that at the level of the law, not simply at the mental level of psychiatrists’ knowledge but at the level of the law itself, there is an evolution that is perfectly clear. We have shifted from the juridical problem of the attribution of responsibility to a completely different problem. Is the individual dangerous? Is he accessible to penal sanction? Can he be cured or reformed? This is to say, henceforth, penal sanction will not be brought to bear on a legal subject who is recognised as being responsible but on an element that is the correlate of a technique that consists in singling out dangerous individuals (...). In other words (...) from now on, a technique of normalisation will take responsibility for the delinquent individual” (A, 25).
709 A, 92.
710 A, 119.
plugging of each into the other, but a certain type of power – distinct from both medical and judicial power – has in fact colonised and forced back both medical knowledge and judicial power throughout modern society.\footnote{A, 25-26.}

Now, Foucault describes this task as the “study” or, as the lecture manuscript says, “the archaeology” of “the emergence of the power of normalisation”.\footnote{A, 25.} We will see how this notion constitutes a novelty both from a historical perspective – i.e., it refers to something that happened in history and introduces a discontinuity, a new layer of practices – and from a theoretical perspective, which is to say that it constitutes a new approach in Foucault’s research on the power over life. First, however, I would like to point out that it is in the moment when this discontinuity is introduced that one finds a fundamental – and relatively neglected – reference to Canguilhem and, more precisely, to his diagnosis of the general process of normalisation taking place around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. My attempt is to show the proximity between Canguilhem’s analysis of this process and Foucault’s hypothesis of the “colonisation” of different institutions and specific areas of exercise of power by a “power of normalisation”.

In the 15 January 1975 lecture, Foucault will further explain and qualify this notion of a power of normalisation, through a series of methodological reflections. First, in setting the grounds for the application of this notion of normalising power to the project of a history of sexuality, Foucault will contrast his own perspective to the approaches mobilised in existing works on the history of normalisation of sexuality. Second, he will revisit his own previous work and provides, through a sort of productive self-criticism, a new account for the historical processes he previously analysed.

Concerning the first point, Foucault claims that he was not “of course, the first to speak about the history of the power of normalisation applied primarily to sexuality” \footnote{A, 42.} He explains that there are, indeed, “a number of books (...) dedicated to the subject and fairly recently a book by Van Ussel has been translated into French that is called La répression de la sexualité”.\footnote{A, 42.} It is interesting to note that, in Abnormal, the critique to the “repressive hypothesis” takes the form of a methodological critique. In the History of Sexuality, the critique seems to have a much clearer political intent regarding the sexuality “we are invited to liberate” (in an implicit reference to Reich and Marcuse): “And the sexual cause – the demand for sexual freedom, but also for the knowledge to be gained from sex and the right to speak about it – becomes legitimately associated with the honour of a political cause: sex too is placed in the agenda for the future” (WK, 6). In this sense, if sex is repressed (...) then (...) speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (WK, 6). “Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the coming age of
regards what he then calls a “theory of power”.\textsuperscript{715} Whereas Van Ussel’s book understands the power exercised over sexuality as fundamentally repressive – and here we could clearly recall the developments on the “repressive hypothesis” in the \textit{Will to Knowledge} \textsuperscript{716} Foucault claims that his own approach offers a different point of view. This leads him to develop in the lecture what I have referred to as the second point, namely, a critical revisiting of his previous work which aims at putting forward a ‘positive’ view of power based on the notion of \textit{norm}. It is precisely when explaining this view of a positive power (to which I will return shortly), that Foucault presents Canguilhem’s reflections as a source for his own development of the notion of normalisation. In this lecture, Canguilhem’s work operates as the ‘way out’ of a juridical, negative and repressive conception of power, as well as the key to understand the constitution, in the eighteenth century, of an “art of government”\textsuperscript{717} transversal to different institutional supports and social practices – and therefore below and beyond the level of the State apparatus.

I believe it is a significant fact for the general economy of Foucault’s argument that the reference to Canguilhem’s “New Reflections” appears right after the proposition of a new way of considering power relations based on the ideas of norm and normalisation and operating through a broad concept of government. These “arts of government”, which Foucault will later define as “governmentality”, consist precisely in governing by the norm. As Foucault claims:

\begin{quote}
The Classical Age developed therefore what could be called an “art of governing” in the sense in which “government” was then understood as precisely the government of children, the “government” of the mad, the “government” of the poor, and before long, the “government” of the workers.\textsuperscript{718}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{715}A, 43.
\textsuperscript{716}As Foucault writes in the WK, “We are informed that if repression has indeed been the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age, it stands to reason that we will not be able to free ourselves from it except at a considerable cost: nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, and irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required” (WK, 5). In the “Incitement of Discourse”, Foucault says outlines the idea according to which sex was reduced to silence, as if its subjugation in at the level of language were a condition of possibility for the mastery over it in reality: instances of prohibition referred back to one another, he explains, “instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence. Censorship” (WK, 17).
\textsuperscript{717}A, 48.
\textsuperscript{718}A, 48-49.
In the broad sense of the term, the idea of government means the inclusion of all these categories of individuals in a normative (here understood in the sense of normalising) space, where their life is managed and controlled and where their deviances and divergences are addressed, corrected and normalised. If the modern functioning of power is defined as government (and later as governmentality), the norm will be at its core. As Beistegui explains, “governmentality coincides with a system of norms, or a normativity, which needs to be distinguished from the order of interdictions and the power of the law, around which, so often and for so long, the problem of government and, more generally, that of power, were (and still are) articulated”.  

In the context of the definition of the power of normalisation both through the advent of disciplinary technologies and of an art of government constituted around the norm, that Foucault refers to Canguilhem’s approach to social norms. In the last part of the 15 January 1975 lecture, Foucault refers us “to a text that is found in the second edition of George Canguilhem’s book, On the Normal and the Pathological”. The text is precisely the 1966 “New Reflections on the Normal and the Pathological”, and more specifically the section “From the Social to the Vital”. I would like to propose that we look closely at this passage since I believe it provides textual evidence for the thesis according to which the emergence of a view of power as norm and of the power of norms is related to a particular way in which Foucault reads Canguilhem. In this passage, Foucault explains:

In this text on the norm and normalisation, there is a set of ideas that seem to me to be both historically and methodologically fruitful. First of all Canguilhem refers to the development in the eighteenth century of a general process of social, political and technical normalisation that takes effect in the domain of education, with the school; in medicine, with hospital organisation; and also in the domain of industrial production. The army could no doubt be added to this list. So we have a general process of normalisation during the eighteenth century and the multiplication of its effects regarding childhood, the army, production and so forth.

In this reference – to the text we have already discussed in the beginning of Part III – Foucault seems to find a framework for his “archaeology” of normalising power (and for the very notion of normalisation). First of all, Foucault seems to extract from the Normal and the Pathological the idea of a process which takes place throughout different “institutional

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719 See, for instance, HS, 252, where power and resistance are both referred to the more encompassing notion of government. As we have seen in Part I, the same proposition reappears in GSO and GL.
721 A, 49.
supports” in relation but not restricted to the level of the State. The process of normalisation is a general one (social, political and technical). As we have seen, this is one of the important features of what I called Canguilhem’s ‘sociological’ hypothesis, namely that there is a unity in terms of the normative (here understood as normalising) intention or project which connects different domains: grammar, industry, war and defence. Second, it is important to highlight, as it is clear in Canguilhem’s example of industrial techniques, that normalisation goes hand in hand with production: optimising the productive process through the normalisation of designs and components, for example. In this sense, as a concept whose meaning was initially linked to a technical and industrial context, normalisation regards optimal ways of doing, fostering and promoting these regular and regulated forms of activity.

However, what is most important for Foucault is perhaps the political force of the norm, which can account for effects of coercion, without any reference to repression:

In the same text there is also the important idea that the norm is not at all defined as a natural law but rather by the exacting and coercive role it can perform in the domains in which it is applied. The norm consequently lays claim to power. The norm is not simply and not even a principle of intelligibility; it is an element on the basis of which a certain exercise of power is founded and legitimised.\footnote{A, 50.}

It is clear in this passage the affirmation of the political force of the norm, which is fundamentally different from that of the natural law. The natural law, in its necessity, constitutes a principle of intelligibility. The norm, on the other hand, presupposes flexibility, malleability, manipulation and infraction – which, as we have seen with Canguilhem, characterise life. However, the norm is also not equivalent to the juridical law, that is to say, the application and performance of a norm is not a decree or a symbolic event of division [partage] between interior and exterior as is the law.\footnote{I take the notion of partage to illustrate the action of a negative power, which banishes, excludes and silences from the first preface to the History of Madness. See HM, xxvii-xxviii. In HM, xxix, the notion of partage appears linked to that of a ‘history of limits’ that explores it.} The norm is rather dynamic in its functioning, continual in its temporality and, what is essential, it deals with constant movement and action of that which it or “normalises”. The object encompassed by the norm is seen as responsive to its action, passible of correction transformation.

As we have seen in Canguilhem’s discussion of the quantitative thesis regarding the nature of the normal and the pathological, one of the important conclusions he put forward, by referring to Bichat, was the difference between the form of necessary effect of the

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\item \footnote{A, 50.}
\item \footnote{I take the notion of partage to illustrate the action of a negative power, which banishes, excludes and silences from the first preface to the History of Madness. See HM, xxvii-xxviii. In HM, xxix, the notion of partage appears linked to that of a ‘history of limits’ that explores it.}
\end{itemize}
physical laws, whose nature was characterised as the condition of possibility for the constitution of vital phenomena. As Canguilhem explained then, this difference is precisely the condition for the existence of pathological phenomena exclusively in the sphere of life. Even though one could ultimately translate and understand pathological states from the perspective of their physical and chemical processes and effects, one cannot speak of pathology and abnormality in the realm of physical phenomena. Pathology and abnormality can only emerge in a realm of evaluation, where phenomena and physico-chemical events are experienced and lived as pathological by a living being. In addition to this axiological polarity, the experience of pathological norms presupposes infraction, that is to say, it presupposes contingent forms of regulation that can be subverted. As we have seen, the existence of these contingent forms of regulation is already a response to that which precedes them, and which is seen as requiring correction, therapy or normalisation.\footnote{NP, 239.} In this passage, when differentiating the norm from the natural law, Foucault seems to be referring to Canguilhem’s extension of this discussion to the social domain. Canguilhem explains that the norm expresses a value rather than a necessary fact and, as such, always presupposed a possibility of inversion and polarity: “A norm offers itself as a possible mode of unifying diversity, resolving a difference, settling a disagreement \[différand\]. But to offer [or to propose, proposer] oneself is not to impose oneself. Unlike a law of nature, a norm does not necessitate its effect...”\footnote{NP, 240.} If the natural law knows no polarity, constituting a structure which makes all other phenomena possible, the norm is, by contrast, a product of this very polarity and is related to a play of forces that characterises power. Its effects are under dispute and both depend on and produce effects of power: in this sense, its very existence is at stake in its effects, in its capacity to produce effects.

The fact of not “necessitating” its effect implies that the norm must be applied, put to work, operated, performed – and perhaps they can only be called norms to the extent that they ‘norm’ or normalise something. Macherey expressed this idea clearly when he suggested that “les normes n’ont pas de réalité en dehors de l’action concrète à travers laquelle elles s’effectuent en affirmant, contre les obstacles qui s’opposent à cette action, leur valeur normative”\footnote{Macherey, De Canguilhem à Foucault, 137.}.

This aspect of the definition of the norm through its action can also shed light on the importance of the empirical attention to the singular, concrete, historical and local forms of
normalisation for the understanding of the power of the norm that we find in Foucault’s work. It is in these different domains of application that the norm “lays claim to power”. It is only by carefully analysing the way in which the norm operates, its action in each particular historical object, that we can understand the ‘nature’ of the norm – or of a certain norm in particular. As Macherey claims, the norm is not in itself independent of its action. The norm is inseparable of its performance (or of the way it is performed), but this performance is ‘where’ power itself resides. From the body of the written law, power migrates to the body of the subject, that is to say to the realm of behaviour, regulated forms of action and conduct.

In this sense, Foucault’s later definition of power as action upon actions, as conduct of conducts, seem to clearly refer to the operation of the norm. Differently from the necessary effects of natural law and from the immediate effects of the kind of regulation that the norm exercises in the organism, social norms express a fundamental contingency – including the contingency of the normative project or agency which offers, proposes or performs it.

According to Macherey’s interpretation of the notion of norm in Foucault, a norm is known and experienced by its effects and not by a transcendent rule. To use different words, the norm is not different from all its effects, which follow necessarily from it. From this fact – through a detour via Spinoza’s ontology – Macherey thinks it is possible to speak of a “naturality [naturalité] and a necessity of the norm”, claiming that “C’est sans doute ce que Foucault a voulu exprimer en parlant de la positivité de la norme, qui se donne entièrement, se produit en produisant ses effets, à travers son action”. But can we say that this necessity and this naturalness are to be found in Foucault’s or in Canguilhem’s work?

If, with Macherey, we look at the nature of the norm itself, we can indeed say that every time there is a norm, it produces its effects. Putting it differently, we can only say that

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727 Macherey, De Canguilhem à Foucault, 90.
728 EW1, 292. In the 1982 interview “The Subject and Power”, Foucault defines power (differentiating from violence) as “an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present action” (EW3, 340).
729 “The exercise of power is a ‘conduct of conducts’ and a management of possibilities” (EW3, 341).
730 Considering the developments on the notion of genre de vie and its effects on the physiological domain of human life, I believe that Canguilhem’s designation of the action of organic norms as “immediate” (as opposed to social norms – mediated by conflict, disagreement, habituation, etc.) can only be understood if taken synchronically. Both the organic norm and the social norm have a history in which their effects are far from being given immediately. But when considered synchronically, the organism is a unity of action and experience, while society – even when characterised by a dominant normative force – remains diverse and fragmented.
731 Macherey, De Canguilhem à Foucault, 96.
732 Macherey, De Canguilhem à Foucault, 96.
a norm exists inasmuch as it is effective, as it produces its effects: it consists in its effects upon a subject. This precisely defines Macherey’s view of a radical immanence of the norm, which we could say differs from what Foucault identified as juridical power, which exists exteriorly to its effects. Juridical power operates by prohibiting, by positing a law according to which one is situated interior or exteriorly. Power in its juridical or repressive form introduces what Foucault called *partage*, symbolic partitioning and division of symbolic and social spaces. In this model however, power is not limited to its points of exercise and application.

For example, if we look at the body of the condemned in *Discipline and Punish*, we note that the public execution is precisely the moment of encounter between the power of the sovereign and the body of the criminal, which until then was relegated to a space of obscurity by a power which is situated exteriorly in relation to this body. These two instances occupied different regions of the social space. The subject’s body under sovereign power is opaque, reduced to an almost symbolic inexistence prior to the application of power. The body could be seen indeed a surface that serves to make power appear in its exuberance; or as Pierre Clastres saw it, as surface of inscription of the law. But power itself does not invest this body in detail, that is, it is not concerned with managing movements and the mechanics of this body, nor its vital or biological processes – the only fact that sovereign power knows about the vitality of its subjects, is that it can be extinguished through deduction, through death. Life is a property that the sovereign has the right to take.

The norm, on the other hand, only exists in the body to the extent that it produces its effects, and to the extent that this body *lives*: the norm is what it does, it is fully immanent to its action. If we, again, look at forms of penalty characterised by the norm, we note that it is in the regulated forms of activity, in the discipline and efficient of times and movements through discipline that the norm invests the body and exists with it. In this sense, we can see how, by mobilising an analogy with Spinoza’s ontology, Macherey can say that the immanence of the norm implies its *naturalité* and its *necessité*. Perhaps one could interpret this *naturalité* from the perspective of an internalisation and assimilation of the norm which

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733 Macherey, *De Canguilhem à Foucault*, 85.
734 For this notion of *partage*, see the first preface to HM.
735 I discuss this topic in detail below.
737 WK, 136.
738 Macherey, *De Canguilhem à Foucault*, 88.
739 See “The Control of Activity”, DP, 149-156.
becomes coextensive with the individual’s behaviour and conduct, constituting a sort of “second nature”, as Nietzsche would put it,\textsuperscript{740} or yet a naturalised \textit{hexis} which becomes indistinguishable from the nature itself. In this sense, norm becomes nature, fully investing the living body. Furthermore, considering our reading of Canguilhem’s notion of plasticity in physiology, we could accept the notion of the norm as natural, if we consider this to mean that the norm is something that ultimately inheres in the natural process of life and, therefore, cannot be fully separated from the subject’s biological life. Inasmuch as human norms of life are both tied to collective techniques and to vital positions of the living human being in the environment, we could say that a social norm operating in the body and interacting with physiological constants is ‘natural’. However, this ‘natural’ does not mean that it is a fact that automatically and blindly follows from a domain of necessary facts of nature. Canguilhem’s effort, as we have seen, was precisely that of criticising the view of life and vital phenomena base on a ‘philosophy of order’. Moreover, how could we say that the norm is ‘necessary’? My view departs from Macherey’s on this point. I believe that this description of the norm as natural and necessary lends itself to ambiguous interpretations of Foucault’s work.

Firstly, the notion of contingency – of a radical contingency of social phenomena, and hence of the norm – plays a key role in Foucault’s critical use of the historical method.\textsuperscript{741} History, he argues, “serves to show how that which is has not always been” and that the things which seem to us most evident or necessary were formed in the course of a fragile and precarious history.\textsuperscript{742} By situating each practice and institution in relation to its history and tracing “the network of contingencies form which it emerges”, one understands how “that which is might no longer be that which is”, exploring explore the virtual points of fracture in the present, virtual points of transgression and transformation.\textsuperscript{743} This focus of contingency is also a key element of Foucault’s definition of the critical ethos in “What is Enlightenment?”, where the investigation of what we are in the present – the “historical ontology of ourselves” – acquires the traits of a critical and experimental task, which asks: “in what is given to us a universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?”\textsuperscript{744} In this sense, the critical attitude begins with an exploration of the contingencies that have “made us what we are”.

\textsuperscript{740} Nietzsche, \textit{Untimely Meditations}, 75-76; the concept reappears in \textit{Gay Science}, 232.
\textsuperscript{741} FR, 89.
\textsuperscript{742} EW2, 450.
\textsuperscript{743} EW2, 450.
\textsuperscript{744} FR, 45.
In a word, contingency is the key to Foucault’s idea of the critical ethos in which one mobilises the “historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them”.  

Second, Macherey’s main lens to interpret Foucault’s notion of the norm is Spinoza, and more specifically the *Ethics*. Let us leave open the question on how far this analogy with Spinoza can be explored in terms of explaining Foucault’s notion of power as norm, and engage with this line of thought in its own terms. I believe that we can find an alternative view of the nature of social norms precisely in the terrain of Spinoza’s philosophy, by looking at different textual places. In the fourth chapter of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (“On Divine Law”), for example, we find a reflection on the notion of law and its ambiguity. According to Spinoza, we apply the word ‘law’ to nature only by analogy, referring to the definite and regular modes of behaviour in nature (and this analogy could also be one of the roots of the anthropomorphic projection of the figure of a divine ‘legislator’ behind the nomologic structure of nature).

“The word law”, Spinoza explains, “taken in its absolute sense, means that according to which each individual thing – either all in general or those of the same kind – act in one and the same fixed and determinate manner”. And this can be said in two ways, depending on whether this manner depends on “Nature’s necessity” or on “human will”.

Spinoza distinguishes, then, two meanings of this notion. The first is that of natural necessity (which refers to an onto-nomological structure of nature – or God) and the second, human statute or ordinance, which refers to the organisation of modes of life and human

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745 FR, 50.
746 Even though I am highly sympathetic to an attempt of reading Foucault with Spinoza, my suggestion is that – in this particular point of his analysis of the norm – Macherey passes too quickly from Foucault to Spinoza (and vice-versa). If it is true that there are several possible analogies to be explored between the two authors, Spinoza’s ontology cannot be attributed to Foucault. Spinoza’s ontology, even if it makes room for freedom, is one of necessity. If we cannot speak of a Foucauldian ontology in the full sense of the term, Foucault’s underlying ontological presupposition seems to be that of a radical contingency that dwells in the core of things. In this sense, I believe, nothing about the norm is necessary for Foucault, not even its effects. To characterise Foucault’s position, instead of Spinoza’s *Deus sive natura*, I would rather employ Nietzsche’s “chaos *sive natura*”
747 “Still, it seems to be by analogy that the word law is applied to natural phenomena and ordinarily ‘law’ is used to mean simply a command which men can either obey or disobey, inasmuch as it restricts the total range of human power within set limits and demands nothing that is beyond the capacity of that power. So it seems more fitting that law should be defined in its narrower sense, that is, as a rule of life which man prescribes for himself or for others for some purpose.” (Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 427).
748 Spinoza says that Moses “imagined God as a ruler, lawgiver, king, merciful, just and so forth; whereas these are all merely attributes of human nature, and not at all applicable to the divine nature” (Spinoza, *Complete Works*, 431).
conducts, according to plan, and which therefore can be disobeyed and broken. Could one say, however, that the laws of nature can be broken?

In addition to that, Spinoza claims in what concerns the second meaning of law (human statute or ordinance), we should consider it from the perspective of contingency, even if its ultimately immanent to the power of man, and therefore to nature as a whole. As Spinoza explains, "although I grant that, in an absolute sense, all things are determined by the universal laws of Nature to exist and to act in a definite and determinate way [as per Ethics I, propositions 29 and 33], I still say that these latter laws depend on human will." 750 In this sense, when we look at human beings as a part of Nature and an expression of this power, everything that follows from human power does so necessarily – and ultimately follows from nature itself. 751 Even the establishment of human laws and forms of life (“man-made laws”) can be conceived from the perspective of Nature’s necessary laws. However, Spinoza argues,

We ought to define and explain things through their proximate causes. Generalisations about fate and the interconnection of causes can be of no service to us in forming and ordering our thoughts concerning particular things. Furthermore, we plainly have no knowledge as to the actual coordination and interconnection of things — that is, the way in which things are in actual fact ordered and connected. 752

And he concludes that “for practical purposes it is better, indeed, it is essential, to consider things as contingent” 753 With this in mind, we can return to our discussion of Macherey’s idea of the necessity of the norm. Even if, through this detour via Spinoza, one

750 Spinoza, Complete Works, 426.
751 Spinoza explains: “Man, insofar as he is part of Nature, constitutes a part of the power of Nature. Thus whatever follows from the necessity of man’s nature — that is, from Nature as we conceive her to be determinately expressed in man’s nature — follows from human power, even though it does so necessarily. Therefore the enacting of these man-made laws may quite legitimately be said to depend on human will, for it depends especially on the power of the human mind in the following respect, that the human mind, insofar as it is concerned with the perception of truth and falsity, can be quite clearly conceived without these man-made laws, whereas it cannot be conceived without Nature’s necessary law, as defined above” (Complete Works, 426).
752 Spinoza, Complete Works, 426-427.
753 Spinoza, Complete Works, 427. An interesting analogy here could be with Canguilhem’s distinction of physico-chemical and vital phenomena: from the perspective of their causes and explanations both pathological and physiological phenomena are describable and explainable by its physico-chemical processes, in the sense that vital phenomena can only take place in a space determined by the necessary laws of physico-chemical processes, and both poisoning and healing only take place because of the chemical reactions that produce them: it is not, however, at the level of the chemical reaction itself that we will speak of poisons and antidotes, but from the perspective of a living being that suffers poisoning. The same chemical substance could be lethal or healing depending on the circumstance and on the organism with which it interacts, and this circumstantial aspect is what characterises life and the experience of the living, while the physico-chemical structure, as we have seen with Bernard, presupposes a continuity between life and death.
could accept that the norm can be considered from the perspective of the necessity of its effects, since it is part of the power of nature and given that there is technically no distance between the norm and its effects, my contention is that if we want to understand the nature of particular norms, we must consider them as contingent. Indeed, as we have seen, Spinoza in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, seems to make room for considering the processes concerning the establishment of forms of life and human behaviour as contingent. Even if he is referring to laws – and our analysis has neatly distinguished the notions of ‘law’ and ‘norm’ – there is something in his definition of laws in interhuman relations that seems to apply also to our definition of the norm, namely the possibility of infraction, the possibility of a conduct which negates and challenges the norm (even if this same conduct can in no way ‘disobey’ natural law and the structure of nature). Disobedience and infraction – the capacity to say ‘no’ and to ‘refuse’, which is of capital importance for Canguilhem and the tradition of *analyse réflexive* – can only take their full meaning in a realm which is both of contingency and evaluation. But our main object of analysis here is not Spinoza’s philosophy, but Foucault’s notion of the norm. What we have seen both in Foucault’s passage in *Abnormal* and in Canguilhem’s explanation in the “New Reflections” is that the norm operates differently from necessary natural laws, not necessitating their effects.

Canguilhem acknowledges that every norm is, in the last instance, relative to life, and that social norms interact with the natural life of human beings and can even be said to be an expression of this particular form of life. We have seen, however, that physiological constants are temporary crystallisations of a dynamic and contingent process. The same is valid for the domain of social norms and collective techniques, where not only do we find contingency, temporary stabilisations and error, but also dispute, disagreement and plurality. We have seen that, for Canguilhem, even if the organism can be the seat of different forces and demands, it posits itself from the perspective of a unity of experience with regards to the environment. Social norms, on the other hand, presuppose a plurality of normative forces in society – and if they are also contingent solutions, their very character of ‘solution’ is disputed. In the social context, the normative force and its project is under agonistic ‘debate’. Moreover, the effects of social norms are also contingent (and here we can refer both to the notion of ‘possibilism’ that Canguilhem finds in the “French school of human geography” and to his own notion of “error”).

Macherey aims at challenging a view

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754 See Chapter 6 and 3, respectively.
according to which the power of norms is “artificial and arbitrary”. But is it not *artifice* precisely the key of Canguilhem’s analysis of collective techniques?\textsuperscript{755}

Here, once again we can return to our reflection on technique and therapy. As we have seen, in these cases the response to the negative aspect of experience (pain, limitation, inefficiency) in technical action is creative and contingent. If we take technique to express the human and social relation to norms in an exemplary way, we could then also say that it is in technical action – in the broad sense, as understood by Canguilhem – that we find a model of power that operates through the norm (and not only through the law). The norm founds a certain exercise of power\textsuperscript{756} and provides the elements for a technical model of power.\textsuperscript{757}

But let us return to the contingency of the norm (and its difference from the necessity of natural law). For Canguilhem, a norm can always be subverted. As he explains: “Because we are dealing with possibility only, that possibility of reference and regulation which the norm offers leaves room for another possibility which can only be its opposite”.\textsuperscript{758}

The norm is therefore a possibility, or a set of possibilities of behaviour. Differently from the organic norm, the social norm presupposes a space of disagreement and agonism.\textsuperscript{759} In this sense one must admit that the form of power that operates through the norm presupposes freedom. As we will see in the next chapter, the apparatus organised around the norm requires freedom and activity as its condition of possibility: in this sense, we could adapt Foucault’s statement in “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice

\textsuperscript{755} In addition to Canguilhem’s analysis of the influence of human artifice upon human physiology, in 1943, we could also quote his analysis of social norms from the “New Reflections”, where he writes: “To sum up, starting with the deliberately chosen example of the most artificial normalisation, technological normalisation, we can grasp an invariable characteristic of normality. Norms are relative to each other in a system, at least potentially. Their correlativity within a social system tends to make this system an organisation, that is, a unity in itself, if not by itself and for itself” (NP, 249).

\textsuperscript{756} A, 50.

\textsuperscript{757} In Foucault, the vocabulary of technique – from the notion of *technologies of power* to that of *biotechniques* – seems to suggest that the model for the analysis of social norms is more based on a technical insight than on an organismist one. Moreover, in the same text where he proposes to analyse the social norm, Canguilhem suggests that the model to think the social should be closer to that of the machine than that of the organism. He writes: “So we see how a technological norm gradually reflects an idea of society and its hierarchy of values, how a decision to normalise assumes the representation of a possible whole of correlative, complementary and compensatory decisions” (NP, 247). And, later in the same text, when critically discussing Comte, he writes: “We shall say otherwise (...) that a society is both machine and organism. It would be only a machine if the collective’s ends could not only be strictly planned but also executed in conformity with a program” (NP, 252).

\textsuperscript{758} NP, 239.

\textsuperscript{759} Or, as Foucault defines it, “a relationship that is at the same time of mutual incitement and struggle” (EW3, 342).
of Freedom” and say that, in the framework of the norm, freedom is the ontological condition of power. \(^{760}\) Indeed, differently from domination, the power is exercised through the norm, “it is exercised over free subjects, insofar as they are ‘free’”. \(^{761}\) The subject’s adherence to this norm also presupposes freedom: “individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behaviour are available”. \(^{762}\) Similarly, the definition of normativity that we found in Canguilhem presupposed not only the possibility of following norms and adhering to them, but also of breaking existing norms and creating new ones. Normativity, in this sense, provided a sort of general theory of the invention of living forms, which was based on contingent and situational possibilities. The norm presupposes a space of mobility and response to changing conditions: the same effects that can be detrimental – and therefore negatively experienced in a certain environment – can be propulsive and positive in a different situation. If, to return to Macherey, the norm seen sub specie aeternitatis is perhaps natural and necessary; the norm experienced from the perspective of the living being is contingent and presupposes a space of freedom, even at the level of physiology.

Furthermore, the norm is also different from the law in its juridical sense. In the juridical model, the law draws a strict line – negatively – differentiating to separate realms through interdiction: the ‘lawful’, which obeys the law by not transgressing it through actions that cross this line of negativity, i.e. that realises what the laws forbids; and the ‘outlaw’, which, as the English word expresses positions himself outside the law, transgressing the interdiction by an action that produces precisely what the law designated negatively (for instance, murder realising what the law ‘thou shalt not kill’ designated negatively, through prohibition). The ‘outlaw’ crosses the line of the juridical and symbolic partage and enters a different space. Thus, the definition of power in the juridical model is repressive: it expresses what one must not do, it exists through the action of forbidding, blocking, preventing and creating limits form action – while punishing through exclusion, repression, silencing and ultimately death, which is where the power of deducing finds its utmost manifestation. The norm, on the other hand, must include and regulate; deviation is seen as something that calls for correction. As we have seen in Canguilhem’s explanation of the quantitative thesis, deviance, sickness and abnormality call for a therapeutic action which must reconduct the divergent phenomenon to an original form and its normal structure.

\(^{760}\) EW1, 284.
\(^{761}\) EW3, 342.
\(^{762}\) EW3, 342.
Now, returning to Foucault’s analysis in Abnormal, the norm exercises its coercive role in a domain of application from which the abnormal must not be excluded, but, on the contrary, included so as to be monitored, corrected, normalised. Precisely developing this dimension of the operation of the norm, Foucault continues:

Canguilhem calls it [the norm] a polemical concept. Perhaps we could say it is a political concept. In any case – and this is the third important idea – the norm brings with it a principle both of qualification and correction. The norm’s function is not to exclude and reject. Rather, it is always linked to a positive technique of intervention and transformation of a sort of normative project.  

It is clear, then, that it is in relation to a reading of Canguilhem’s reflections on social norms that Foucault proposes, in Abnormal, the possibility of thinking of a normalising power, which operates by “positive” techniques of “intervention and transformation”, and which extends its rule over the “abnormal” understood as a “dangerous individual”. Rather than casting out those who represent an infraction of the normal, they are instead brought to the core of a series of institutions – such as the medico-legal complex (in the example from Abnormal), but also the school, the hospital and prison in Discipline and Punish, where their bodies and conduct will be the target of a power which carries out a “normative project”.

Finally, it is “this set of ideas”, Foucault claims – Canguilhem’s conception of social norms and normalisation translated into a new perspective for the analysis of power – “this simultaneously positive, technical, and political conception of normalisation that I would like to put to work historically by applying it to the domain of sexuality”. Here we have, then, an important chapter in that which I think we could call the articulation of the ‘itinerary of the norm’ in Foucault’s work.

Before we turn to a different point in this itinerary of the norm, reflecting on the ways of thinking the use and power of norms, which differ from normalisation, I would like to analyse two textual places that attest a radical historical transformation of power relations in the eighteenth century, which, I contend, are contemporary to the historical process of normalisation identified by Canguilhem. Indeed, this view on the historical transformation of power complements Canguilhem’s thesis, from a political perspective. My intention is to show how, since at least the History of Madness, Foucault was aware that ‘something happened in history’ in terms of the forms of exercise of power and social control.

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763 A, 50.
764 A, 50.
765 Chapter 9 below.
Additionally, my attempt will be to show that the articulation of the normalising and disciplinary power – through the introduction of the norm – as it will be clear in Discipline and Punish, depends on a theoretical change and the introduction of another concept, and that is the concept of life. Diachronically speaking, that is to say in terms of the history of Foucault’s thought, I believe that it is possible to say that it is through Foucault’s studies on the modern politicisation of life that the sort of transformation of power identified in the History of Madness, could in fact be revisited and re-described through the notions of norm and normalisation in the works of the 1970s. My thesis here is that this shift identified in the functioning of power mechanisms – which is consistent throughout Foucault’s work – will only be defined through norm and normalisation after the introduction, by Foucault, of a notion of politicised life. As we have learned in our reading of Canguilhem, life is spoken of in many ways, and these are the different norms; to think of a power that operates through norms is to think of power over life.
Chapter 8

The Functioning of the Norm

In this chapter, I present historical instantiations of a power that operates as norm, highlighting the relation between norm, freedom and activity. Unfolding our discussion of social norms in previous chapters, I will analyse Foucault’s account of the birth of the modern psychiatric asylum in the *History of Madness* and the emergence of disciplines in *Discipline and Punish*. My guiding hypothesis is that, although the analysis of the birth of the modern asylum in the *History of Madness* already presents some of the main features of normalising power, it is only with a clear formulation of the notion of *life* and the *living body* as the surface of events and field of conflicting forces, that the notion of norm appears (or is conceptualised). As I have suggested in previous chapters, life is spoken of in many ways, and all those refer to norms: there is a fundamental relation between life and norm in Foucault’s work – and the reading from a Canguilhemian perspective makes that clear. In the present chapter I will trace the itinerary of the norm, showing how a perception of a historical transformation of power operations is accompanied by the gradual emergence of a paradigm which analyses power over individual and collective life through the notion of norm. I then return to the conceptual model to think the politicisation of life that I proposed in Part I, thinking of the structural relation between subject, government and norm, describing how they operate in the framework of normalisation. Finally, after developing some of the ways in which the framework of norms explains modern functioning of power, I suggest that normativity may provide us with the tools to think of a counter-history of the norm in Foucault’s work.

8.1. The Birth of the Asylum

In the last decade of the eighteenth century, Pinel releases the ‘mad’ from their chains and grilles, delivering them from the dungeons of the *Ancien Régime* and from the silence and darkness that the so-called Classical Age had thrown upon them. According to Foucault, the liberation of the insane at Bicêtre is a famous story with mythical undertones in the history of psychiatry. Pinel’s humane and philanthropic decision of removing the chains from the prisoners meets Couthon’s sceptical response: “Now, citizen, are you mad yourself to seek
to unchain such beasts?” – to what Pinel calmly replied: “Citizen, I am convinced that these madmen are so intractable only because they have been deprived of air and liberty”. 766

In the History of Madness, this event of alleged humanistic liberation puts an end to an age of proscription, exclusion, invisibility and marginality, which is how Foucault characterised the institution of the “Great Confinement”. 767 In the History of Madness, however, the chapter entitled “The Proper Use of Liberty” [“Le bon usage de la liberté”] narrates the gradual transformation and disappearance of this social practice, its institutional and perceptive coherence. 768 The experience that was being disarticulated in the eighteenth century is the one that perceived the insane under the same broad category as other individuals embodying error, poverty, transgression, sin and marginality or, as Foucault writes: “a system of exclusion” which mixed and situated madness among the other dangers of unreason. Madness begins to acquire an individual “face” among the multitude and confused bodies of unreason. As Foucault explains: “For the first time in the Christian world, sickness found itself isolated from poverty, and all other faces of misery. In short, everything that previously surrounded madness began to fall away. The circle of poverty and the circle of unreason both vanished”. 769

766 HM, 464.
767 The “Great Confinement”, which coincides with Descartes’ dismissal of the possibility of madness from the process of doubt in the Meditations (HM, 44-46), is a set of institutional, cultural and social practices of exclusion, which consisted in banishing the mad to a realm of inexistence, darkness and negativity, in a word, to non-being. The institutional equivalent of this cultural experience of unreason is the confinement of the insane (together with a mass of undifferentiated marginal figures) in the dungeons of the Ancien Régime, where they are deprived of light and freedom. In this institutional experience of exclusion one of the main features of HM is developed – that of an “archaeology of silence”, as its first preface announced it. The “Great Confinement” is also the experience of repression of the language of the insane, and the history of the practices that silenced this speech is a very important aspect of the philosophical project of Foucault’s doctoral thesis. See HM, 44-78.
768 This chapter is one of the key developments on the transformation of power taking place in the eighteenth century to the extent that it emphasises a power that no longer represses and silences – or, at least, which does not count on those operations as its main forms of action – but precisely introduces an idea of a power that functions in an interplay with freedom. This chapter is absent from the first translation of Foucault’s book Madness and Civilisation, and therefore had not integrated a first reception of the book in the Anglophone context. This is why I think it is important to analysis of the book, and I hope to show the relevance of that section to the general economy of the book, contributing to a more complete reception of the Histoire de la folie. That also partly explains my choice of providing a close, descriptive reading of the chapter. As Jean Khalfa explains in the introduction to his translation of this book: “Madness and Civilisation, the English translation of Histoire de la folie, was based on an abridged French edition from which roughly 300 pages had been removed, together with most of the scholarly apparatus (about 800 footnotes and the bibliography). Most interpretations and criticisms made of the book in the English-speaking world were therefore based on a partial perspective” (HM, xiii).
769 HM, 417.
In the eighteenth century, the figure of the mad begin to be seen as a singular one, different from crime and other forms of social danger and cultural transgression. In Foucault’s words, it was gradually thrown into a “new solitude that slowly disengaged it from the confused community of the houses of confinement”.\textsuperscript{770} And he adds that despite the emphasis of the history of psychiatry in reform, humanisation and philanthropy, “what disappeared in the course of the eighteenth century was not the inhuman rigour with which the mad were treated, but the obviousness of confinement, the global unity into which the mad had been unquestioningly subsumed, and the countless threads that locked them into the unbroken weave of unreason”.\textsuperscript{771}

The evidence of unreason is lost, and now the heterogeneous masses grouped in a same ‘inhuman’ space of confinement becomes a motive for moral and political scandal. This promiscuous space could produce all sorts of moral contaminations and the presence of the mad is seen as degrading, while also being individualised and differentiated. The single population grouped under the category of unreason and which, with the institution of the Great Confinement, took the place of the leper in the geography of social segregation, is now seen as a composite reality, a multitude of incompatible faces and differentiated bodies, foreign to one another. This perception of unreason as confusion and heterogeneity contributes to the gradual individualisation and differentiation of madness within the “houses of force”. The mad are an ethical danger within a social danger: they threat to degrade that which, in the criminal, remains of his humanity, the point of possible salvation correction and recovery.\textsuperscript{772} Following Foucault’s narrative, the Duke La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt presented a report on the houses of detention and confinement of Paris in December 1789. According to Foucault: “He was of the opinion that the presence of the mad gave the houses of confinement a degrading style, and risked reducing the inmates to a level that was demeaning to their humanity, and that the mix of people tolerated there showed a lack of seriousness on the part of both the authorities and the judges”.\textsuperscript{773}

With the decrees promulgated between 12 and 16 March 1790, all those “detained in castles, religious houses, gaols, police houses or prisons (…) on the strength of a lettre de cachet (…) are to be set free”,\textsuperscript{774} except if they have been “sentenced and charged or are

\textsuperscript{770} HM, 419.
\textsuperscript{771} HM, 419.
\textsuperscript{772} The libertines and the figure of Sade play an important role in illustrating this moral scandal of the eighteenth century. See, for example, HM, 134.
\textsuperscript{773} HM, 421.
\textsuperscript{774} HM, 421.
awaiting trial for a serious crime (…) or have been locked up on account of madness”. These decrees, which could be seen as expressions of a progressive and enlightened age of reforms, represented a new development in forms of the gradual singularisation of the social perception of madness and its isolation in the space of confinement. Furthermore, in the very formulation of the decrees, especially in their differentiated treatment of those who were once part of the coherent mass of unreason, are a symptom of the dismantling of an experience. In Foucault’s words, “the world of confinement collapsed, bringing liberty to inmates and restoring the poor to their families”. This process constituted, in the old geography of confinement, “an empty space where madness was free to express itself”.

Thus, Foucault’s narrative of the disappearance or collapse if the Great Confinement underlines both the continuity of the seizure of the social agents perceived as mad, and the discontinuity in the experience and perception organised around this practice. In contrast with the foundational myths of modern psychiatry, for Foucault:

Madness was liberated long before Pinel, not from the material constraints that had kept it in prisons, but from a more decisive, more constricting form of servitude that had it under the control of that dark power. Even before the Revolution, madness had been set free. Free to a perception that individualised it, free in the recognition granted its individual face, and the process that finally gave it the status of an object.

However, madness also enters in a relation with freedom in a different sense. The new perception of madness and its constitution as an object cannot be separated from the institutional and non-discursive setting in which it takes place. The collapse of the Great Confinement and the constitution of the modern asylum are symptoms of the historical transformation of technologies of power around the end of the Classical Age.

With Pinel and Tuke, the mad are liberated from their chains and from the most apparent traits of physical coercion. But this “absence of constraint” in the modern asylum which is in process of constitution in the transition from eighteenth to nineteenth century “was not the liberation of unreason, but madness mastered in advance”. In the case of Tuke’s Retreat, for example, one can see that “the potential suppression of physical

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775 HM, 422.
776 HM, 427. In this part of the narrative, Foucault puts forward a first historical discussion on the notion of ‘population’, which will later become of the main concepts in the biopolitical paradigm.
777 HM, 435.
778 HM, 419. “In some sense, madness was already liberated, in that was detached from the old forms of experience in which it had been caught. Detached not by some philanthropic intervention…” (HM, 417).
779 HM, 489.
constraint was part of a system whose essential element was the constitution of a ‘self-restraint’ in which the patient’s freedom, engaged by word and the observation of others, was ceaselessly threatened by the recognition of guilt”.  

In Foucault’s view, both Tuke and Pinel will develop forms of treatment and control of the mad based on the restitution and investment of their freedom. In this, they extend the line that emerged with the disappearance of the “Great Confinement”. As Foucault explains, in the time of Pinel and Tuke, “confinement was no longer, in a rigorously negative manner, the total abolition of liberty. It was a more restrained and organised form of freedom”. In this sense, the institutional dispositif of the asylum – even though it embodies clearly negative, repressive, and coercive aspects – introduces an innovation with regards to Classic confinement: a space of freedom.

The space delimited and circumscribed by the walls of the asylum allowed the inmates to employ, under more or less strict conditions, their freedom. As Tenon and Cabanis thought – even before Pinel and Tuke, Foucault writes, “this caged semi-liberty, this caged freedom would be of therapeutic value” and, as long as it produced and administered this secluded freedom, “confinement becomes an agent of cure”.  

The inmate had to use this new circumscribed, “caged” liberty properly; that is to say, he to make “good use” of it [bon usage]. And they would do so under a new “gaze that watched over it and controlled it”. From the darkness and invisibility of the dungeon, madness emerges into the realm of visibility, no longer as a threat of radical otherness, tragedy or dissolution, but “as a calm object, kept at a safe distance, and yet totally visible, fully open to reveal its secrets”. As Foucault explains: “Madness was no longer to be inscribed in the negativity of existence, as of its most brutal figures, but now progressively took its place in the positivity of known things. In this new gaze, where compromises disappeared, barriers like grilles were also abolished”.

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780 HM, 502.
781 HM, 435.
782 “This was because, for them, as for all physicians of the eighteenth century, the imagination was always responsible for all the sickness of the mind, because it partook of both body and soul and was the birthplace of error. The more men were constrained, the more their imagination tended to wander, and the stricter the rules restraining their bodies, the greater the disorder in images and dreams. So much so that freedom was therefore more effective than chains when it came to binding the imagination (...). Imagination was silenced by this vagabondage of liberty” (HM, 436).
783 HM, 437.
784 HM, 442.
785 HM, 443.
In this new configuration of freedom and visibility, control and gaze, we can identify new parameters of the functioning of power – new ways of “governing the mad”: within the walls of the asylum, the inmate is invited and incited to make use of his freedom, his voice, speech and will. This contributed both to his recovery and to the operation of an objective or objectifying gaze, which was able to collect information about each individual and on the processes and dynamics of ‘man’ (as an object of knowledge, a theme that will reappear in the analysis of the birth of human sciences in *Discipline and Punish*).

No longer silenced by a power that banished it to the night of confinement, to this vague and distant place of marginality and exteriority, madness (and the behaviour of each ‘ill’ individual) will show itself to the gaze of a power that individualises, observes, controls it in its freedom. It is important to note the structural change taking place in the operations of power: what seems to underly Foucault’s analysis of the “Birth of the Asylum” is a form of power that operates also in the realm of positivity – a power that creates and makes possible, by organising material and institutional conditions, a power that institutes something in the order of things, a power which stimulates, fosters and allows action and expression – and even requires them for its full exercise – rather than merely blocking and hindering. It is in the new concrete institutional conditions of expression that madness and the mad can be individualised and objectified. Another important theme of both the *Birth of the Clinic* and Foucault’s 1970s work seem to be emerging here in his reflections on the gaze: in the asylum, a new affect and operation of power consists precisely in looking, in ways of seeing and making visible. In the organisation of visibility and the establishment of an objective gaze we also find an important line of argument that Foucault will develop in *Discipline and Punish*, under the rubric of what he will call “panopticism”.

Contrarily to what Foucault often stated regarding his conception of power in the *History of Madness*, this new form of power presupposes a series of positive operations. For the asylum presupposes the conduct of the inmate (even if “caged”) in its machinery – like grammar, for Canguilhem, presupposed the use and regulation of the forms of employment of language, the asylum will presuppose action and expression from its inmates. In the machinery of the asylum we find the elements of this increasingly immanent regulation of one’s conduct, of a power that implies this conduct – here we can see, the first steps in the

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786 “Governing the mad” is a recurrent example of Foucault’s later reading of one of the main topics of HM. See, for instance, A, 49 and GSO, 3.

787 This visibility also presupposed a way to record this process of continual observation. In the *History of Madness*, the tool developed to do this was the “asylum journal”.

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constitution of a power which consists not in preventing and impeding action, but which aims at constituting itself as sort of grammar of conduct, which Foucault will develop in detail in *Discipline and Punish*. In positing the “good use of freedom” by the inmates, this emerging form of power finds a new point of support and investment: the conduct and the confessional manifestation of each individual’s condition and interiority. Here, again, we find a form of taking charge and responsibility for the insane which aims at acting upon their conduct, correcting it, reconducting it to normality.

We can revisit the “Birth of the Asylum” from the perspective of the historical process of normalisation that both Foucault and Canguilhem diagnosed. Even if the norms presupposed in the “caged” context of the asylum are restrictive and delimit a very strict space for action, action and activity are constitutive parts of the machinery of the asylum. In any case, it is only by the liberation of the possibility of the usage of freedom, of action and activity, that the mad can be brought into a space both of knowledge — mediated by the gaze that the asylum makes possible — and of normalisation. The institution of the asylum in this context can be retranslated as a first clear reflection on the application of norms to an agent’s conduct, a clear first experiment of the interplay between power and freedom that the notions of norm and normalisation will presuppose, even if the norms of the asylum are strict and in many ways repressive in their structure, they still require the use of a freedom in the production of a conduct to be framed, classified, managed.

In the *History of Madness*, then, Foucault has, as I have just shown, an acute perception of the development of new forms of operation of power which accompany the critical, philanthropic and reformist discourse of Pinel and others. Moreover, this historical transformation is simultaneous to other processes identified in Canguilhem’s sociological diagnosis (and in Foucault’s appropriation of it in *Abnormal*) and indicates the production of a caesura that *Discipline and Punish* will develop through the insight of the advent of discipline, analysing of other social and institutional domains. However, in the *History of Madness*, despite the clear perception of this historical discontinuity, Foucault did not formulate this transformation in terms of the advent of a normalising power. Some of the key elements of that concept are already present in the Foucault’s analysis of the “Birth of the Asylum”, which as we will see are strikingly close to some of his later depictions of “disciplinary power”. What is absent, however, is a clearly articulated concept of norm which will allow the constitution of the paradigm of normalisation.
The most evident way to account for this absence is perhaps historical. Indeed, if we turn to Foucault’s 1965 letter to Canguilhem, we note that Foucault then states the following: “when I began to work, ten years ago, I did not know you – not your books”. In the letter, Foucault situates the impact of Canguilhem’s work upon his own research from the Birth of the Clinic onwards. Additionally, the first edition of History of Madness was published in 1961, and Canguilhem’s addendum to the Normal and the Pathological dates from 1966. Therefore, the use of a Canguilhemian notion of social norm is simply a historical or chronological impossibility. I believe, however, that there is a different way to account for this absence – one which would require a reframing of the problem, since it seems historically problematic read a work from the perspective of its later developments and refer to previous moments of this very work through the notion of absence. This procedure risks a whole series of retrospective projections. A different way to pose the question that would avoid this sort of projection would be, then, an attempt to identify points of emergence of the norm in Foucault’s work.

I have already pointed to possible points of emergence of the norm. I believe this is a complex history, for there are many different textual places to which we could trace the point of departure for the ‘itinerary of the norm’ in Foucault’s work. In any case, I would like to propose a working hypothesis here: that the clear emergence of the notion of the norm relies on another series of philosophical developments in Foucault’s thought, which is to say the emergence of a concept of life, of the living body with its forces, power and energy. As with the notion of power, this notion of life is both a historical innovation, something that is historically constituted – which Foucault’s work is therefore engaged in describing – but also a theoretical innovation, a conceptual acquisition. In Chapter 1, I have underlined some of the points of emergence of the notion of life, since The Birth of the Clinic and the Order of Things, 788 passing through his 1974 lectures in Brazil (when he formulates the notion of “somatocracy”), 789 the text on “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, 790 and arriving at the history of the living body in Discipline and Punish and the collective life of the population in Will to Knowledge. In the History of Madness, Foucault identifies a shift in the functioning of power, without however proposing a notion of life (which takes shape later in his analysis, around 1963 and 1965), which seems to be the theoretical condition for a conceptualisation of the norm in the terms we have been describing.

788 OT, 250.
789 DE2, 43.
790 FR, 83.
This notion of life is not articulated in the History of Madness, nor are the notions of norm and normalisation explicitly formulated. However, in the passage I have analysed, it is already possible to note a reflection on the constitution of a power which is not understood as ‘privation’ or absence of freedom, but which is exercised strategically over freedom itself. In this sense, if the History of Madness, since its 1961 preface, is conceived as an “archaeology of silence” and an enquiry on “the fundamental choices of our culture” and its “permanent structures of exclusion”, it is also composed of a set of minor historical narratives. The latter are concerned with particular institutions and practices, which do not always reproduce the form of operation of power based on silencing and exclusion. At a first narrative level, the History of Madness is, indeed, the history of a negative form of power exercised over the ‘mad’. At a second, however, it presupposes more refined institutional readings, where we find the elements of a different (and positive) conception of power.

The elements articulated in the formation of the asylum lead us to a second narrative regarding an institutional disappearance accompanied by the emergence of new social practices, which make this historical transformation of power even clearer. That is, the disappearance of the supplice in Discipline and Punish. Here, as we will see, Foucault mobilises a similar narrative strategy – one that he also used in narrating the disappearance of leper and the void it produced in the social and perceptive space: the emergence of new modern institutions, practices and knowledges is presented through the diagnosis of the disappearance, dismantling or collapse of other institutions. As I have suggested, these processes are happening around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries across different social and institutional domains, pointing to that which could be seen as general historical transformation. In this sense, if in the History of Madness the collapse of the institution of the “Great Confinement” of the Classical Age gave way to the formation of the modern asylum, in Discipline and Punish, the disappearance of public torture and execution will give way to the birth of a disciplinary society, where punishment is corrective and administered through a moral orthopaedics. My idea here is to show that, alongside the processes of technical, industrial, grammatical normalisation (among others), Foucault complements and extends Canguilhem’s thesis through a diagnosis of a parallel political process: the normalisation of individual and collective life, of living bodies and conducts.

791 HM, 32; DE1, 196-197; DE1, 996.
792 See HM, especially “Stultifera Navis” (Part I).
8.2. Discipline as Norm

*Discipline and Punish* begins with the detailed description of the public execution of the parricide Damiens:

On 2 March 1757 Damiens the regicide was condemned to make the *amende honorable* before the main door of the Church of Paris, where he was to be ‘taken and conveyed in a cart, wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a torch (...); then, ‘in the said cart, to the Place de Grève, where, on a scaffold that will be erected there, the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs and calves with red-hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed the said parricide, burnt with sulphur, and those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together and then his body drawn by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds’.  

In Foucault’s narrative, the application of this death sentence, in itself a horrifying ritual, encounters several obstacles, multiplying Damiens’ suffering. In the exemplar processes of torture which accompanied public executions, violence was applied to the body of the condemned in “long processes in which death was both retarded by calculated interruptions and multiplied by a series of successive attacks”. In this mode of sovereign punishment, the breach in the law was conceived as a physical attack to the body of the sovereign which the law represented. Breaking the law meant attacking the king. In this sense, “every crime constituted as it were a rebellion against the law” and the “criminal was the enemy of the prince”. Committing a crime (and therefore becoming an enemy of the prince) was thus understood as the analogon of a declaration of war. Accordingly, Foucault explains, the right to punish was understood as an aspect of the sovereign’s power to wage war against external enemies. The penalty therefore must express the dissymmetry in power and force existing between the prince and the convict, that is why it has to be a

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793 DP, 3.
794 DP, 12.
795 DP, 47.
796 DP, 49.
797 DP, 50.
798 “The right to punish, therefore, is an aspect of the sovereign’s right to make war on his enemies: to punish belongs to ‘that absolute power of life and death which Roman law calls merum imperium, a right by virtue of which the prince sees that his law is respected by ordering the punishment of crime’ (Muyart de Vouglands, xxxiv). But is also a way of exacting retribution that is both personal and public, since the physico-political force of the sovereign is in a sense present in the law” (DP, 48).
ceremony of terror, symbolically bringing to an end a war between the criminal and the sovereign – “the outcome of which was decided in advance”. This dissymmetry, the irreversible imbalance of forces, was an essential element in the public execution. A body effaced, reduced to dust and thrown to the winds, a body destroyed piece by piece by the infinite power of the sovereign constituted not only the ideal, but the real limit of punishment.

However, Foucault’s narrative begins precisely with the observation that this “painful spectacle of a thousand deaths”, these scenes of brutal and direct application of sovereign power over the body of the condemned criminal are disappearing in the eighteenth century. In the same way that the History of Madness provided an account for the disappearance of the institution of the “Great Confinement” and the ‘humanisation’ of the treatment of the mad, Discipline and Punish begins with the disappearance of the ‘supplice’ and the acknowledgement of the ‘humanisation’ of penalties. In Foucault’s words: “By the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the gloomy festival of punishment was dying out”. Indeed, radical changes in the ways of punishing and significant institutional transformations seem to be taking place, which is made clear in a general process of ‘reform’ and ‘humanisation’. The clearest expression of these changes can be observed, according to Foucault, in the “disappearance of the tortured, dismembered, amputated body, symbolically branded (…), exposed alive or dead to public view”. The moment of the application of punishment would no longer be seen as the theatrical moment of the exhibition of the sovereign’s prerogatives, touching a criminal body which had until then no right to visibility, a surface for the display for the exuberant power of the sovereign and its law. The violent rituals of sovereign vengeance are being replaced by a “gentle way of punishment”: a punishment which aims at correcting and reclaiming the criminal – while preserving his ‘humanity’ – instead of annihilating him. As Foucault shows, the eighteenth century saw several protests against public executions. Reformers were advocates of a form of punishment that had to be legitimate and, therefore, respect, “measure” and “humanity”. Foucault quotes a document from 1789, where one reads: “let penalties be regulated and proportioned to the offences (…); let the tortures that revolt humanity be abolished”.

799 DP, 49.
800 DP, 50.
801 DP, 50.
802 DP, 8; 14.
803 DP, 8.
804 DP, 73.
The supplice, once the part of the rituals of ostentation of sovereign power and its symbolic renewal, came to be seen as an outrageous and degrading spectacle. It was necessary to punish, but without extravagant excess and expenditure of violence and force. As Foucault explains, this “need for punishment without torture was first formulated as a cry from the heart and from an outraged nature. In the worst of murderers there is one thing, at least, to be respected when one punishes: his ‘humanity’”. 805

The reforms and institutional changes taking place in the eighteenth century will lead to a punishment that is of a less immediately physical nature, one which is aimed at correction, cure and improvement of the criminal. In fact, the ‘humanisation’ taking place in the application of the penalty – the imperative to punish with “less cruelty, less pain, more kindness, more ‘humanity’” 806 – is accompanied by what Foucault calls a “displacement in the very object of the punitive operation”. 807 As he explains, punishment will act in depth “on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations” of the individual. As we have seen in Abnormal, sentences will be connected to expert opinion – “psychologists and minor civil servants of moral orthopaedics” 808 – and judgement will also be passed on the “passions, the instincts, the anomalies, infirmities, effects of environment and heredity”, and finally on “perversions, drives and desires”. 809 The judge judges something different from the crime or the criminal act itself, that is to say judgement becomes a judgement of normality: 810 “a whole set of assessing, diagnostic, prognostic, normative judgements concerning the criminal have become lodged in the framework of penal judgement”. 811 Consequently, the object of punishment must go beyond the act of inflicting pain upon the body, it must produce a new behaviour, through systematic surveillance and correction, while at the same time discovering the causes of criminal nature in the realm of the individual’s interiority. Punishment is now related to the “soul” of the criminal.

In these new ways of punishing, Foucault will find the elements for what he calls “a genealogy of the modern soul”, that is to say of the “psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness”, 812 which will constitute one of the main points of articulation of norms and

805 The text continues: “The day was to come in the nineteenth century when this ‘man’, discovered in the criminal, would become the target of penal intervention…” (DP, 74).
806 DP, 16.
807 DP, 16.
808 DP, 10.
809 DP, 17.
810 DP, 20.
811 DP, 19.
812 DP, 29.
forms of subjection. This enigmatic concept of soul (which deserves a much more detailed analysis than the one we can offer here) designates the point of articulation of forces, a point of intersection of different lines of coercion and obedience which shape the individual’s behaviour and its instinctual patterns. This “soul” to which Foucault refers is both a point of articulation and internalisation of power relations, and a key to the individual’s conduct not so much because it is the centre of representations and imagination, but because it is the “seat of habits”. It is, therefore, an important element in the shaping of a scheme of habitual behavioural responses, which, in our reading of Canguilhem, emerged as one of the key characteristics of the norm.

This “modern soul”, whose emergence is contemporary with the new technologies of punishment, is an important cog in the machinery of government applied upon the individual, government that passes through the individual and the relation she entertains with herself. But how can punishment reach the individual’s soul, behaviour and habits? Precisely through the body: through a series of coercions upon the body, repeated actions, routines, situated in a previously organised space which will produce effects of subjection. Moreover, this “soul” will also have rebound power effects upon the individual’s body, in such a way that the individual “becomes the principle of [her] own subjection” – and “the soul, the prison of the body”. The goal of these operations is to produce a docile body, that is, a body that “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved.”

In this process, punishing will no longer be a violent retribution or a fierce vengeance for the criminal’s transgression of the law. Rather, it will enact a whole series of security measures and normalising procedures, which are not necessarily intended to “punish the offense, but to supervise the individual, to neutralise his dangerous state of mind, to alter his criminal tendencies”. Is the convicted person a danger to society? Is he curable or...
readjustable? Penal procedure will engage with these therapeutic questions and will employ normalising procedures to ‘treat the criminal’ and obtain a cure. As Foucault puts it, judgement will presuppose an “assessment of normality and technical prescription for normalisation”.  

Differently from mere judicial penalty, which makes reference to a “corpus of laws and texts that must be remembered”, the disciplinary mechanisms that begin to be established “secreted a ‘penalty of the norm’ which is irreducible in its principles and functioning to the traditional penalty of the law”. Sovereign punishment was an episode, an event. The norm, by contrast, is defined by a constant structure, a constant operation. This ‘penalty of the norm’ is a “perpetual punishment that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions”, it “compares, differentiates, hierarchises, homogenises, excludes. In short, it normalises”. Normalisation, thus, appears as a correlate of a political technology of the living body.

If the criminal was previously seen as an enemy who when transgressing the law came to occupy a place of exteriority in relation to it, a place which the violent execution would turn into a banishment from life itself, in the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the criminal is assimilated by institutions, techniques and forms of knowledge to which he appears as an ‘abnormal individual’ and target of corrective treatment. As we have seen in the History of Madness, the processes of humanisation and reform accompanied the constitution of a new technology of power. Now, having his ‘humanity’ safeguarded, the criminal is situated within a field of control and prevention, which touches regions of his body and interiority that were unknown to the sovereign’s law. The latter touched the criminal’s body only to mark it with its own seal, or to deduce and, ultimately, to take the individual’s most valuable possession, his very life. The body is now to be invested, through a whole series of methods of training that target the individual’s ordinary behaviour and everyday activity. Power will take charge of the body and time of the convict effecting a “regulation of his movements and behaviour (...); a concerted orthopaedy applied to convicts in order to reclaim them individually”.

In the same way that the asylum constituted a field of controlled freedom by situating the inmate under a supervisor’s gaze, so will disciplinary institutions invest the activity of the body, situating it in a field of visibility, which is a space of operation and

819 DP, 21.
820 DP, 183.
821 DP, 183.
822 DP, 183.
823 DP, 130.
application of norms. We have seen how, in the History of Madness, the constitution of the modern asylum was also accompanied by the formation of a field of visibility and an objective gaze that encompassed the action and expression of the inmates. This theme of the medical gaze – developed in 1963 in the Birth of the Clinic – reappears in Discipline and Punish. The madman, locked in the obscurity of the Ancien Régime’s dungeons, now came to integrate a field of constant surveillance and visibility in the asylum: power now consisted in making visible, in shedding light upon its objects (instead of banishing them from the realm of the visible). The same sort of operation takes place in Discipline and Punish, where the theme of the gaze finds its expression in the Panopticon, “an architectural an optical system” and a concerted distribution of “bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes”. In this new assemblage, the body is taken out of the obscurity in which it found itself and is situate in a transparent perceptive field.

Like the machinery of the gaze in the asylum, the Panopticon also functioned as a political laboratory: “it could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals”. There is, however, a difference between the analyses of 1961 and 1975, and this is particularly the place that the body occupies in 1975 as the main point for understanding the new corrective tactics of power. In the 1961 analysis of the asylum, one finds a similar attention to the disposition of certain spatial conditions of visibility, the articulation of an objective gaze, which produces effects both of knowledge and power. Additionally, one finds a similar focus on activity, on positive technologies, which are then characterised through the idea of a regulated use of freedom (that is to say on the conduct, which anticipates Foucault’s later analysis of governmentality). However, what is striking about the examination of disciplinary institutions in Discipline and Punish is the shift to a more technical model of analysis (it looks at a specific heterogenous ‘machine’ such as in the case of the Panopticon, which operates through norms over the body and conduct of the individual). But this technical analysis of power has a particularity – which I believe is one of the main differences between the two books – which regards its point of articulation: the

824 DP, 205.
826 “The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognise immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather its three functions: to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap” (DP, 200).
827 DP, 200.
828 See BB, 2 and EW3, 341, for a reflection on government and an idea of power as conducting conducts, respectively.
body. Corrective penalty will thus invest “the body, everyday gestures and activities”\textsuperscript{829} It will also invest the “soul, too, but in so far as it is the seat of habits”.\textsuperscript{830} The body and the soul, understood as “as principles of behaviour, form this element that is now proposed for punitive intervention”; and this intervention mobilises instruments consisting of “forms of coercion, schemata of constraint, applied and repeated. Exercises (…), regular activity, (…) good habits”.\textsuperscript{831} If for Canguilhem norms and bodily functions (including physiological constants) are related to habit, Foucault politicises Canguilhem’s conclusions, showing how collective techniques – under the form of technologies of disciplinary power – intervene in the functioning and performance as well as the use and economic exploitation of the body.

In *Discipline and Punish*, it is the active living body that is targeted by punishment and prevention: it is through operations upon the material, architectural or social conditions around this body, and upon the body itself, that power affects the ‘freedom’ of those upon and through whom it is exercised. As I pointed out earlier, this shift in focus could be seen as the culmination of a series of historical and theoretical developments through which Foucault aims at situating life and the living body in the field of politics. The attention to the body in *Discipline and Punish*, I believe, could be understood as a chapter in the general framework of an analysis of the politicisation of life in Foucault’s work.\textsuperscript{832}

In the analysis of the application and functioning of these new punitive techniques, Foucault finds what he calls a “political economy of the body”, which is concerned with increasing the body’s forces, while at the same time, channelling them, making them useful, employing them in processes of production. In Foucault’s analysis, this political economy of the body is employed by the new systems of punishment operating in the injunction utility-docility:

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\text{[E]ven if they [the systems of punishment] do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use ‘lenient’ methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and submission.}\textsuperscript{833}
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\textsuperscript{829} DP, 128.
\textsuperscript{830} DP, 128.
\textsuperscript{831} DP, 129. Ultimately “what one is trying to restore in this technique of coercion is not so much the juridical subject (…) but the obedient subject, the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders” (DP, 128-129).
\textsuperscript{832} In Part I, We have seen how, at least since “Nietzsche, Genealogy and History”, the vital reality of the body was the seat of a historical play of forces and inscription of events.
\textsuperscript{833} DP, 25.
For Foucault, therefore, the history of punishment must be written against the background of a “history of the body”. This theme was already articulated in 1971:

The body is the inscribed surface of events (…), the locus of a dissociated self (…) and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history.\textsuperscript{834}

This philosophical and methodological position, underlying the history of the forms of punishment that Foucault will undertake in \textit{Discipline and Punish}, is particularly relevant for our discussion on the politicisation of life, especially in what concerns the introduction of a concept of life as a theoretical condition of possibility for thinking a power of normalisation in Foucault. As we have seen in Chapter 1, in this history of the body (and in the analysis of the “political economy of the body”), we find an interesting injunction between biology and politics. Foucault is aware of this when he situates his project of a “history of the body” in relation to a “bio-history”, which considered the relation between social and biological events.\textsuperscript{835} But, in addition to this bio-historical field, “the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs”.\textsuperscript{836}

We can see that, in Foucault’s approach, the living body and its vital and biological dynamics are the point of articulation of power. If, with Canguilhem, we have seen an attempt of achieving a philosophical project which consisted in introducing history into life, Foucault seems to identify, in the work of historians such as Le Roy-Ladurie,\textsuperscript{837} another philosophical project, that of introducing biological life in history, as an active factor impacting human history. Foucault’s own project seems to presuppose the articulation of these two philosophical propositions in the field of a “history of the body”. The body and its natural processes constitute an active force in history, but – and here we can definitely note a prolongation of Canguilhem’s ‘plasticity’ insight – the body and its biology are also shaped and manipulated in history. This is to say that the body is not considered as a sort of ‘pure’ natural reality placed outside history and that would sporadically emerge in it, imposing its effects (pathologies, viruses, demographic variations). In Foucault’s view, the living body itself is also a historical reality and one could say that its particular mode of historicity is that

\textsuperscript{834} FR, 83.
\textsuperscript{835} DE2, 97; WK, 143.
\textsuperscript{836} DP, 25.
\textsuperscript{837} DP 25, 330.
of power and conflict. To the idea of “bio-history”, Foucault combines a political perspective: a political history of the living body.

The performance of this living body, the deployment of its energies, the use of its forces, the tasks it carries out and the signs it emits are fully invested by power: it is the behaviour and the processes of the living body that are increasingly regulated by power. How, through an investment in detail upon its anatomy, can this body become a useful force of production? How to extract the maximum utility and productivity of its forces, while at the same time assuring maximum docility of the latter? There “may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: a political technology of the body”.

According to Foucault, “in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions and obligations”. There is, however, something new taking place in the eighteenth century. First, there was “the scale of control: it was a question not of treating the body, en masse, ‘wholesale’ as if it were an indissociable unity”. The machinery of power explores the body, “breaks it down and rearranges it” through a “political anatomy of detail”. The use of the body is now considered in the calculations of a power that “implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the [body’s] activity rather than its results”.

Indeed, the image that follows the description of Damiens’ death in Discipline and Punish is that of a prison’s timetable: a perfect administration and regulation of times and movements, a complete control of the prisoners’ activity, the execution of precise tasks under a constant surveillance. The disappearance of the supplice marks the emergence of a new form of penalty, which is concerned not with the effacement of the body of the criminal, but with a series of actions applied to his body, aiming both at disciplining its forces and energies and correcting and transforming his nature. The disappearance of the supplice and the humanisation of penalties are symptoms of a historical transformation which culminates with the advent of disciplinary power: a new “technico-political register, which was constituted by a set of regulations and by empirical and calculated methods relating to the

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838 DP, 27. In DP, the living body is the sight of resistance and conflict. In the same way in WK, 145, resistance invests life and mobilises it against power; FR, 83.
839 DP, 26.
840 DP, 136.
841 DP, 138-139.
842 DP, 137.
army, the school, the hospital, for controlling and correcting the operations of the body”.

The disciplines will organise and codify time, space and movement in order to produce docile bodies and subjected subjects: “These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assumed constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called ‘disciplines’.” The disciplines constituted a new technology for exercising power over the body through a “subtle coercion”, “obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body.”

In the disciplines we see an inclusion of the body and its biological processes in the core of power technologies: governing delinquents, criminals or, in a word, abnormal individuals, means governing their bodies through the norm. In this sense, through a series of constraints and rules, the body is included in a normative space and its conduct shaped. We can, once again, return to Canguilhem’s analysis of grammar as an exemplar of the function of the norm: in the case of disciplines, what we see is the inclusion of dangerous and deviant bodies into a normative and normalising space, in the interior of which they will be framed. Power is no longer situated in the moment of the application of an exuberant and dispendious force over the body of the criminal; on the contrary, as we have seen with Macherey, it is in the very performance of the norm, which, in Discipline and Punish, is a performance of the body. Returning to Canguilhem’s analysis, we can say that normalising power operates in the body as grammar operates in language, but in this case, it is a grammar of the body and its behaviour – a grammar of the bodily conduct – that is articulated through the norm, and the first condition for the body to perform a norm is that it is alive.

In this new configuration of the power, organised around the relation between body and norm, the “art of punishing, in the regime of disciplinary power, is aimed neither at expiation, nor even precisely at repression”. It rather divides normal and abnormal, traversing all points of the social space, comparing, assessing, measuring and normalising individuals. As in Abnormal, Foucault develops Canguilhem’s insight of a general historical process of normalisation, extending it to a conception of a normalising power over the living body. In the formulation of this power of the norm, Foucault mentions Canguilhem:

The power of the Norm appears through the disciplines (...). Let us say that, since the eighteenth century, it has joined other powers – the Law, the Word

843 DP, 136.
844 DP, 137.
845 DP, 137.
846 DP, 182.
(Parole), the Text and Tradition – imposing new delimitations upon them. The Normal is established as a principle of coercion in teaching with the introduction of a standardised education and the establishment of the écoles normales (teacher’s training colleges); it is established in the effort to organise a national medical profession and a hospital system capable of operating general norms of health; it is established in the standardisation of industrial processes and products (on this topic, one should refer to the important contribution of Canguilhem...). 847

To sum up, in Foucault, the conceptualisation of a normalising power presupposes a previous conceptual acquisition: a concept of life, which will appear in 1975 under the form of the individual living body. However, if Discipline and Punish emphasised individual life in the notion of a disciplinary power of the norm – which I characterised as a grammar of individual bodily conduct – in the Will to Knowledge, the emphasis is on the collective life of the population. The same transformation in the operations of power and the diminishing importance or dominance of sovereign power gives way, in 1976, to a biopower over the collective body of the population. In the Will to Knowledge, Foucault contrasts the sovereign’s “right of death” to a new power over life. 848

8.3. Biopolitical Governmentality and Normalisation

As we have seen in Chapter 1, in the Will to Knowledge, Foucault further differentiates two modalities or poles of the power over life. Foucault’s point of departure is the finding articulated in Discipline and Punish, namely the retreat of a juridical modality power exercise, and the diminishing importance of a power of deduction and subtraction, which found its main expression in the right of the sovereign to take the subject’s life. 849 In the Will to Knowledge the disarticulation of the death penalty as the main expression of power marks the emergence of new modality of exercise which consisted in the care of life, in inciting, reinforcing, controlling, optimising life. 850 Complementing the disciplinary techniques developed around the body as a machine, which he now calls ‘anatomo-politics of the living body’, Foucault now highlights the emergence of a power focused on the species-body and its biological processes, biopolitics. 851

847 DP, 184.
848 WK, 135.
849 WK, 136-137.
850 WK, 136.
851 WK, 139. In biopolitics, power “takes control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined, but regularised” (SMD, 247). Still, regarding this
In a lecture from 17 March 1976, Foucault explains that there is a difference between these two poles. Biopolitics mobilises different measures addressing the collective life of the population, to intervene at the level of its general phenomena, such as life expectancy and mortality rate.\textsuperscript{852} As he explains, in biopolitics:

[R]egulatory mechanisms must be established to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field. In a word, security mechanisms have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimise a state of life.\textsuperscript{853}

As Foucault explains, an important aspect of the development of biopower was the “importance assumed by the norm, at the expense of the juridical system of the law”.\textsuperscript{854} We have seen, in \textit{Discipline and Punish}, how the law was linked to violence and to the application of power as an event. Biopolitics operates through mechanisms that are not necessarily violent and that are not concerned with the subtraction of life in their application, but rather with its enhancement. Its mechanisms are corrective and regulatory. This, however, does not mean that the law “fades into the background”; rather, it “operates more and more as a norm”,\textsuperscript{855} which is to say that judicial institution will come to integrate a continuum of apparatuses of normalisation. As Foucault writes: “a normalising society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centred on life”.\textsuperscript{856}

In \textit{Society Must be Defended}, one notes that these two poles of the power over life are articulated through the norm:

We can say that there is one element that will circulate between the disciplinary and the regulatory, which (...) will make possible to control both the disciplinary order of the body and the aleatory events that occur in the biological multiplicity, the element that circulates between the two is the norm. The norm is something that can be applied both to a body one wishes to discipline and a population one wishes to regularise.\textsuperscript{857}

However, even if discipline and regulation of overall processes of the population operate through the norm, this does not mean that one is reducible to the other. The norm is applied in different levels of intervention. In this sense, Foucault explains, one should not

\textsuperscript{852} SMD, 246.
\textsuperscript{853} SMD, 246.
\textsuperscript{854} WK, 144.
\textsuperscript{855} WK, 144.
\textsuperscript{856} WK, 144.
\textsuperscript{857} SMD, 252-253.
consider the “normalising society” as a sort of “generalised disciplinary society” whose institutions have taken over everything.\textsuperscript{858} The normalising society is rather the result of the articulation of power over life through the norm both at the level of individual living bodies and the level of the collective body of the population and its processes.\textsuperscript{859}

In our reflection on the historical instantiations of the power of the norm in Foucault’s work, we have traced the different formulations of an acute perception of a historical transformation in the way power operates – to which Foucault attributes different beginnings,\textsuperscript{860} but which becomes more evident in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this transformation, power no longer operates predominantly through the law (that is, negatively), and comes to function as a norm. What one sees – both theoretically and historically – is a process of ‘immanenisation’ of power in Foucault’s work. From a theoretical perspective, this implies a critique of the juridical and negative model of power operations (based on prohibition and repression). With this critique, as Foucault claims in Abnormal, he “calls into question” his own earlier analyses.\textsuperscript{861} Revisiting the theme of the exclusion of lepers in the Middle Ages, Foucault describes a power that consists fundamentally in casting certain individuals out “into a vague external world beyond the town’s walls, beyond the limits of community (...) into outer darkness”.\textsuperscript{862} These practices of exclusion, or “marginalisation”, are used as a model to describe the power exercised over “the mad, criminals, deviant, children, and the poor”,\textsuperscript{863} a power which works through “exclusion, disqualification, exile, rejection, deprivation, refusal and incomprehension; that is to say, an entire arsenal of negative concepts or mechanisms of exclusion”.\textsuperscript{864} As we have seen in Canguilhem’s analysis of grammar – as well as in the examples of disciplinary punishment and the modern asylum – the norm operates by inclusion into a normalising field in which freedom is deployed and regulated.

Instead of the moment of ‘application’ of power as an event of negation, banishment, exclusion or death, the power of the norm is continual in time and coextensive with the activity and performances of living human beings: there are no moments ‘exterior’

\textsuperscript{858} SMD, 253.
\textsuperscript{859} Foucault explains: “To say that power took possession of life in the nineteenth century, or to say that power at least takes life under its care (...), is to say it has, thanks to the technologies of discipline on the one hand and the technologies of regulation on the other, succeeded in covering the whole surface that lies between the organic and the biological, between body and population” (SMD, 253).
\textsuperscript{860} For instance, in WK,139, the power over life begins to be articulated in the seventeenth century.
\textsuperscript{861} A, 43.
\textsuperscript{862} A, 43.
\textsuperscript{863} A, 44
\textsuperscript{864} A, 44.
to power, no intervals, since inasmuch as there is action, there is norm, regulation or a conduct to be normalised. Power depends on this performative and pragmatic aspect of the conduct. As we have seen, in the case of the modern asylum for instance, the power of the norm requires freedom to act, freedom of movement and a certain dynamism of the conduct; it incites, generates and organises action and speech, for, as Macherey has shown, this is ‘where’ it exists – in these effects, in this activity: the power of the norm is immanent to the conducts in which it operates.

The power of the norm is also immanent to its domain of application in the sense that it no longer consists fundamentally in a reference to a realm of the law, which is exterior and transcends conduct and behaviour; on the contrary, the law itself functions more and more like a norm.\textsuperscript{865} The law is no longer that exterior and repressive authority that finds in the sovereign’s sword its main expression, but is gradually incorporated in a continuum of institutions and technologies of government and regulation of conducts.\textsuperscript{866} Power is no longer a synonym of that law, transcendent and symbolic, that operated a \textit{partage} between permitted and forbidden, interior and exterior, life and death. It is rather the assimilation of this which was the realm of exteriority into a new normative-normalising space.

In more abstract terms, power as described in the juridical model presupposed a relation of pre-existence and exteriority between the \textit{relata} of power relations; as if the \textit{relata} were substances which preceded the relation (madness and the power that silences it, sexuality and a society that represses it). In the framework of the norm, this relation becomes immanent: it is the relation itself that constitutes the \textit{relata}. Looking at the case of ‘individualisation’ in \textit{Discipline and Punish}, François Ewald explained this idea through the example of the linguistic system: “an individualisation which is substanceless, rather like the way, in the system of language, in which the opposition between signifiers can be traced back only to differences, unless one can fall back on the notion of the signified having a substance. It is a pure relationship. It is a relationship without support.”\textsuperscript{867} Both norms and counter-norms exist in the same field, in the same space of freedom which power presupposes.\textsuperscript{868}

\textsuperscript{865} WK, 144.
\textsuperscript{866} WK, 144.
\textsuperscript{868} EW1, 292.
From a political perspective, this ‘immanentisation’ implies that, as Foucault says in “The Social Extension of the Norm”, “we are always on the inside” and “the margin is a myth”. As he explains: “It is illusory to believe that madness – or delinquency or crime – speak to us from a position of absolute exteriority”. In Ewald’s words, the norm “integrates anything which might attempt to go beyond it – nothing, nobody (...) can ever claim to be exterior”. To conclude, we could perhaps say that wherever there is life, there is norm – and wherever there is norm, there is power and a field where discipline and counter-conducts, normalisation and normativity find themselves in permanent agonistic relation.

Both power and resistance take place in this same field, which is ultimately that of our action: which norms will be performed? Which normative or normalising forces will become hegemonic?

To conclude, with this reflection in mind, and considering our analysis of the different instantiations of the power of the norm, we can now return to the schema proposed in Part I regarding the ways to think power over life in that triangulation between three categories that organise Foucault’s analysis: norm, government and subjectivity. How could we describe the modality of politicisation of life characterised as normalisation by using this structure? Each of these categories, as we have seen, presupposed a series of questions: regarding government, what are the operations mobilised for acting upon actions and conducting conducts? The norm: how is it understood and what are its main forms of operation? Finally, the subject: what are the dominant forms of constitution of the subject in the modality analysed?

Roughly speaking, in the model of normalisation, government is operated though norms that are related to life in two different levels: that of the shaping and conduct of the individual’s behaviour, her use of freedom, deployments of forces and energy of the individual living body, on the one hand, and the regulation and management of general processes of the population, the intervention to increase or decrease vital processes, or to maintain them at a certain level, on the other. Government as normalisation means disciplining the individual’s behaviour in detail and regulating the processes of the population through statistical control, means and averages, the action to situate these processes within a space delimited by the norm. These two levels, as we have seen, intersect,

869 FL, 198 [DE2, 77].
870 FL, 198.
and one of the key examples of this intersection of forms of government is sexuality. As Foucault explains:

On the one hand, sexuality, being an eminently corporeal mode of behaviour, is a matter of individualising disciplinary controls that take the form of permanent surveillance (...). But because it also has procreative effects, sexuality is also inscribed, takes effect, in broad biological processes that concern not the bodies of individuals but the element, the multiple unity of the population. Sexuality exists where body and population meet. And so it is a matter for discipline, but also a matter for regularisation.\

But how are norms understood from the perspective of normalisation? In the case of discipline, norms are fundamentally principles of correction and schemes of response and organisation of behaviours and performances in relation to power effects, such as the maximisation of productivity and utility, and the increase of docility of the body. These norms and the way they function cannot be separated from a series of institutional settings which enact them, architectural structures that embody them, and present them as unthought conditions or rules of behaviour. In the perspective of regulation, norms are seen as quantitative tendencies to be maintained, implemented or restored, but which only exists through the way the collective body of the population lives, since it is this collective regulated form of life that creates trends and curves of birth or mortality rates, life expectancy, disease and epidemics, etc. These quantitative trends in the biological life of the population are also determined by the qualitatively established way of life in which they emerge (the ways and levels of life that Canguilhem referred to), which is regulated by norms of hygiene and health, norms of behaviour connected to sexuality, to the relation with the environment, the milieu, among other factors which the norms regulates.

Finally, what are the predominant modality of constitution of subjectivity that the power over life conceived as normalisation presupposes? The subject which corresponds to the forms of government and the norm of normalisation is the point of articulation of habits and schemes of behaviour generated and performed in discipline; the subject that emerges through dividing practices, constant surveillance, examination and normalising sanction is a ‘subjected-subject’. The dominant form of subjectification in this model is subjection (assujetissement), that is the production of a normalised subject or, to put in Canguilheman terms, a subject which is the outcome and the configuration of well-fixed norms. But our reference to Canguilhem leads us to a question; how could one break the norms of assujetissement? Is this modality of the politicisation of life the only possible mode of the

872 SMD, 251-252.
relation between life and norms? Our analysis of Canguilhem seems to suggest a negative answer.

8.4. From Normalisation to Normativity

Throughout Part III, I have discussed the importance of Canguilhem to the formation of a paradigm of normalisation in Foucault’s work. I hope to have demonstrated the relation between power and norm in two different domains. First, how normalising power is exercised in the perspective of what Canguilhem discussed in the quantitative hypothesis. In this sense, we find in Canguilhem’s discussion, tools to explain the functioning of normalising power in Foucault. If Canguilhem identified social and political concerns and ideologies at the sources of the quantitative thesis on the nature of the pathological, an exploration of Foucault’s analysis of normalising power in society further clarifies this idea, showing how these concerns are enacted in different institutions and in society as a whole. As he made clear in Abnormal, penal practices seem to be a privileged place for analysing this enaction: here, precisely the vocabulary and structure that we found in Canguilhem’s critique of the quantitative thesis reappear in the analysis of the emerging forms of punishment in the end of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century. These practices, formed in the intersection of medical and juridical institutions, are marked by a power of normalisation which colonises other institutional terrains. The notion of abnormal or dangerous individual played an important role for the development of this technology of normalisation, which extended power below and beyond the actual infraction of the law in crime. A whole vocabulary of infinitesimal deviations and abnormalities in instincts and drives is introduced, and the individual has his ‘criminal nature’ now ‘pathologised’ and situated in a spectrum of variations of a norm. The conception that the quantitative hypothesis proposed of therapy – both in the medical, organic sense, and in the social and political sense – finds its analogon in Foucault’s view of disciplinary and normalising sanctions at the level of individuals, of the monitoring biopolitical care of the population. In terms of the both the anatomo-politics of the individual living body and the biopolitics of the population, we can also find in Canguilhem’s notion of plasticity and the intertwinement of vital phenomena and collective social techniques a fruitful perspective for re-describing power relations in Foucault and its relations with life and life processes. The permeability and exchanges of biology and society
played a key role in Canguilhem’s description of human norms, as it plays a key role in Foucault’s description of biopower.\footnote{As we have seen, in Canguilhem’s work, even human physiology is intertwined with society.}

The second way in which I have proposed to use Canguilhem as a tool to read Foucault’s notion of a power that operates as norm and through the norm, was a reading of the “New Reflections”, which Foucault developed in Abnormal. In this text by Canguilhem, we have found an exploration of the functioning of norms in society, and a key hypothesis that Foucault expanded and developed in his work, namely, that in the eighteenth century a general process of normalisation begins to become a dominant historical force. In relation to this view, we have situated two moments in Foucault’s work which clearly develop a similar diagnosis of this historical transformation, now understood from the perspective of power. Specifically, my hypothesis is that the functioning of power as norm presupposes the emergence of a notion of life in Foucault’s work, in such a way that we could affirm with Le Blanc that talking about life means referring to norms and vice-versa.\footnote{See Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes.}

Two questions still remain to be analysed in our exploration of the Foucault-Canguilhem encounter. First, how did Foucault find in Canguilhem the tools to re-think the notion of subjectivity beyond what he called a philosophy of the subject? Or, from a different angle, how can the conceptual tools found in Canguilhem be used in our exercise of reading Foucault, especially with regards to subjectivity and subjectivation? Second, how can Canguilhem’s notion of vital normativity be used as a way to think different ways to engage norms in Foucault’s work? How can normativity be thought in relation to resistance and critique in Foucault’s work?
Chapter 9

Normativity and the Arts of Life

In previous chapters, I have traced the itinerary of the norm in Foucault’s work, offering a reconstruction of the functioning of power from the perspective of Canguilhem’s idea of norm. I have explored Foucault’s reading of the social and historical hypothesis of normalisation articulated by Canguilhem in the “New Reflections”, showing how he appropriated and further politicised Canguilhem’s model in order to rethink power relations and, more specifically, modern forms of power over life. However, this is not the only way in which norms are experienced, mobilised and performed in Foucault’s philosophical histories. In this chapter, I will explore a different way of conceiving the norm and our relation to it. If I have until here interpreted Foucault’s work from the perspective of an experience of the norm marked by normalisation, in this chapter we will see how Canguilhem’s notion of normativity can open new perspectives in terms of an active creation and performance of norms, especially in the context of what Foucault called the arts of living or the biotechniques. In the reading I propose, there are fundamentally two ways in which we could relate Foucault’s work to Canguilhem’s notion of normativity: the first is a reading of Foucault’s research on ancient ways of life as a chapter of a history of norm, seen from the perspective of the creation and active engagement with norms. The second is a reformulation of Foucault’s idea of critique and critical ethos, and a different way to situate the question of normativity in critical activity, focusing on what I will call ‘alternormativity’ and a ‘political ‘art of listening’.

With the notion of ‘alternormativity’, my attempt is not to provide an answer or a solution to the so-called ‘normativity debate’ in the terms in which it has been articulated in by different critical theorists (normative deficit, anti-normativity, cryptonormativity). My proposition is rather to re-think the terms of the debate, and to re-frame it, by pointing to a different notion of normativity – as well as to a notion of critique that would function differently from the way proposed or presupposed by critical theorists. This redefinition of critique presupposes the redefinition of normativity on the basis of the reading of Canguilhem I have proposed in previous chapters. If critique is defined as an ethos and a ‘political art of listening’, in which way could one say it is normative or involves normativity?
9.1. Life as *Bios*

In 1976, after articulating the idea of the radical politicisation of life, Foucault also suggested that life cannot be fully encompassed by power, and that it constantly escapes it. Moreover, he explains, from the moment when politics becomes biopolitics, life also becomes the main terrain of struggle and the place for the articulation of resistance.\(^{875}\) As we have seen, a related conception – of a life that can be defined in ways that differ from power-knowledge mechanisms – will reappear in his later work. In his lecture courses of the 1980s, Foucault understands life as *bios*, analysing it by looking at a set of practices which constitute the *arts of life* or, as he will define them in 1982, as *biotechniques*.\(^{876}\) The ancient *bios* is evidently not the same as the politicised biological life of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Foucault stressed this discontinuity by tracing the emergence of the modern concept of life at least since the *Birth of the Clinic* and the *Order of Things*. Moreover, the *bios* is not the ‘other’ of power, something that would relate to power and norms only from the perspective of a radical ‘alterity’ or ‘exteriority’.\(^{877}\) In the previous chapter, we have seen how the notion of norm was mobilised in the articulation of a power with no exterior; to think life from the perspective of the norm means therefore thinking life always from within the framework of the norms that inform it. Additionally, a whole series of events in the history of thought separates us from the ancients – a whole series of fractures, which constitute the condition of possibility of our own modern experience of life. In a certain sense, the *bios* of the Greeks is inaccessible to us as an experience.\(^{878}\) For this reason, the ancient *bios* is not a figure of life that could be simply mobilised against modern technologies of power over life, as if we could

\(^{875}\) “It is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them” (WK, 145). Foucault later adds: “Moreover, against this power that was still new in the nineteenth century, the forces that resisted relied for support on the very thing it invested, that is, on life and man as living being” (WK,144).

\(^{876}\) HS, 485-487.

\(^{877}\) Commentators have seen in the Greek *bios* an ‘alternative’ to the forms of power over life in biopolitics. Mauer, for example, projects a conceptual distinction that is absent form Foucault’s work (*bios/zoe*) to sustain a similar view. See Mauer, *Foucault et le problème de la vie*, 202.

\(^{878}\) In Foucault’s work, one finds a whole series of conceptual resources to think this distance and the multiple historical breaks that separate our modern experience from that of the ancients. By considering OT, for example, one could mobilise the concept of *episteme*, through which it would become evident that different historical breaks and discontinuities separate our own *episteme* from the general experience of antiquity and its own historical *a priori*. Furthermore, in the courses dedicated to the ancient material such as HS, Foucault explicitly thematises this historical break, for example, by proposing the notion of “Cartesian moment” (HS, 14), describing a moment when an entire experience of the truth (namely, that of spirituality) is deconstructed and replaced by a new form of experiencing, knowing and having access to truth, which dispenses with the myriad of practices of the self and spiritual exercises through which one had to shape one’s life in order to become ‘able’ of acceding to this truth.
actualise the ancient experience of a political life – of a life of freedom – against power. In this sense, from the biological and politicised life of the 1970s to the *bios* of 1980s, not only is there a clear displacement in Foucault’s analysis, but there is also a historical space, which is perhaps insuperable.

Nevertheless, in this displacement one notes the continuity of a problem: the relationship between life and norm in history, and between these two concepts and that of technique. This problematic no doubt echoes the ways in which Canguilhem analysed both the relation between human history and a history of human forms of life (and the collective techniques that shape them), and the historical and social process of normalisation. In this sense, although marked by historical discontinuity, the notion of life and its different historical figures constitute one of the key elements linking the works of the 1970s and 1980s, especially if one looks at the series of concepts that gravitates around the notion of life: *bio-history*, *bio-power* and *bio-techniques*. The concept is plural and multifaceted but the concern driving Foucault’s problematisation expresses a form of underlying unity. If, in the *Will to Knowledge*, life appeared through its interrelations with a power that manages and acts upon it, in later concepts – such as *biotechniques* and *techné peri bion* – life appears connected to forms of action one exercises upon oneself and upon others. In both cases, life is related to technologies that attribute a certain form to it, but in very different ways. In 1981, life is defined as the material, the condition and the product of this technique, of the art that works upon it; *bios* is a “life that can be qualified” and “the correlative of the possibility of modifying one’s life, of modifying it in a rational fashion and according to the principles of the art of living”.

This conception of life is the outcome of Foucault’s detailed exploration of the different arts of living proposed by the ancients. Foucault finds in the ancient philosophical

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879 Which Foucault clearly situates, in the ancient context, as “non-slavery” (EW1, 286).

880 This is also because, “if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere” (EW1, 292). In this sense, freedom is not the ‘other’ of power, that is to say, it is not something one could oppose to power; it is rather a condition of possibility of power itself; in other words, freedom is the “ontological presupposition” of both ethics and power (EW1, 284). The relative elimination of freedom – or its reduction through a process of prevent any reversibility – would culminate in “domination” (EW1, 283). In the previous chapters we have seen two important examples of the presence and use of freedom in power relations (in HM and DP) which characterises the what we called ‘the power of the norm’; to these examples, one could add the integration of freedom in the “arts of government”, where power is exercised on the conditions that make action possible, i.e. a “management of possibilities”, as it appears in STP, 35-44 or EW3, 340.

881 ST, 34. See Chapter 1.

882 This exploration, he explains, can also be understood as “the history of the arts of living, of philosophy as a form of life” (CT, 316). Ewald also notes this inventorial attitude in Foucault’s research;
schools a varied inventory of techniques, practices and exercises that were mobilised to give shape to one’s life: forms of meditation\textsuperscript{883} and tests,\textsuperscript{884} exercises and daily practices concerned with giving form to one’s life.\textsuperscript{885}

Several analyses from the 1980s illustrate this concern. Let us consider, for example, the notion of “spirituality”, which in the \textit{Hermeneutics of the Subject} characterises an ancient philosophical experience of truth, which is clearly related to the production of a way of life, of an \textit{ethos}. Spirituality is an important category for Foucault, since it groups a series of ascetic practices that the ancients employed in order to produce the conditions for gaining access to truth for a subject who is, originally, deprived of it. Foucault explains that spirituality implies that this access depends on “a kind of work (…) a progressive transformation of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labour of ascesis”.\textsuperscript{886} Spiritual practices presuppose the shaping of a way of life in which the access to the truth becomes possible, and it is also within a certain way of life that the “\textit{effet de retour}” of the truth upon the subject is experienced and cultivated.\textsuperscript{887}

A second example which serves as a guiding thread in Foucault’s exploration of the ancient ways of constituting and shaping the \textit{bios} is the proximity between philosophy and medicine that characterises the care of the self. In the field they share (\textit{mia chora}), defined by the notion of \textit{pathos}, the ancients dedicated special attention to the body and the passions, through forms of care that involved norms, prescriptions and performance of certain forms of behaviour.\textsuperscript{888} We have seen how, for Canguilhem, medicine was the \textit{art of life}, a technique that emerges from \textit{pathos} and addresses the norms of life which constitute disease.\textsuperscript{889} In Foucault’s analysis in the \textit{Care of the Self}, philosophy and medicine play an

\begin{itemize}
\item as he characterises it in an interview, it was a work of “\textit{historien positif}”, a systematisation of the sexual moralities of antiquity (DE2, 1487).
\item See HS, 24 March 1982, first hour.
\item See HS, 17 March 1982, second hour.
\item For Deleuze, this attention to the Greeks could be seen as a strategic theoretical move to think the issue of subjectivation. As Deleuze claims, Foucault’s focus is “not the Greeks, but our relation to subjectification, our ways of constituting ourselves as subjects” (Deleuze, \textit{Negotiations 1972-1990}, trans. Sean Hand. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, 106). From this perspective, Foucault’s question is about the possibility of becoming subjects in different ways than the techniques of power constitute us (as subjected subjects). My attempt in this chapter is to show that the inventory of historically different ways of being a subject challenges the hegemony of present of forms of subjection and subjectivation and its allegedly (or apparently) natural, immediate and necessary character, by showing the creative power underlying each of these contingent forms, and the possibility of employing this power in the effort of creating new forms.
\item HS, 16.
\item HS, 16.
\item CS, 54.
\item NP, 126.
\end{itemize}

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analogous role: they are fundamental elements in the ancient arts of living and techniques of the self.⁸⁹⁰

In the ‘archive’ of ancient medicine and philosophy, Foucault finds a whole series of prescriptive practices, of instructions regarding norms and rules of life and the process of applying them to oneself. As he explains in the Use of Pleasure, the documents he refers to are “for the most part ‘prescriptive’ texts – that is, texts whose main object (…) is to suggest rules of conduct”.⁸⁹¹ These are “‘practical’ texts, which are in themselves objects of a ‘practice’ in that they were designed to be read, reflected upon, and tested out, and they were intended to constitute the eventual framework of everyday conduct”.⁸⁹² Medical and philosophical texts are seen as part of a process of engaging with norms, and Foucault depicts them as “functional devices that would enable individuals to question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects; in short, their function was ‘etho-poetic’”.⁸⁹³

What conclusion could one draw from a comparison between the descriptions of the operations and technologies of power over life that Foucault offers in his 1970s books and his later kaleidoscopic inventory of the ancient ethopoetic techniques in what concerns the relation to norms? If throughout the works of the 1970s life is politicised and put in relation to norms from the perspective of normalisation, in the 1980s, Foucault points to a different possible relationship between life and norms – which, I believe, can be thought from the perspective of what we have called, with Canguilhem, normativity. It constitutes, as Davidson puts it, “a form of response to his previous analysis of the power of normalisation and the formation of knowledge in modern society”.⁸⁹⁴ In fact, Canguilhem himself proposed a reading of Foucault’s work in terms of a radical critique of normalisation. For Canguilhem, “from the beginning of his ‘genealogical’ investigations regarding cultural behaviours he

⁸⁹⁰ CS, 54-55. For a development regarding this notion of a mia chora, a same field that philosophy and medicine find in the notion of pathos and therapy, see the 20 January 1982 lecture (HS, 97). As Foucault explains, “the practice of the self as it is defined (…) and prescribed by philosophy is itself conceived of as a medical operation at the centre of which we find the notion of therapeuein” (HS, 98). Foucault returns to that theme several times in his analysis of the ancient philosophical schools, comparing them to medical clinics. As he says in a lecture from 1982, the school of philosophy was established “as clinic for the soul: it is a place you go to for yourself or to which you send your friends, etc. You come for a period to be treated for the evils and passions from which you suffer. This is exactly what Epictetus says about his philosophy school. He conceives it as a hospital or clinic of the soul (...). A philosophy school is an iatreion (a clinic). You should not walk out of the philosophy school in pleasure, but in pain” (HS, 99).

⁸⁹¹ UP, 12.

⁸⁹² UP, 12.

⁸⁹³ UP, 13.

⁸⁹⁴ Davidson, “Introductory Remarks to Georges Canguilhem”, in Foucault and his Interlocutors, 22.
presents himself as a denouncer of normality of anonymous norms”. In Canguilhem’s reading, Foucault’s later works propose the task of the “elaboration of an ethics, in the face of normalisation and against it”. 895

But how can this historical inventory of biotechniques be seen as a critique of normalisation? In which way could it be seen as an expression of normativity?

I believe that one of the keys to understand how Foucault’s work on the ancients constitutes a reflection on our capacity to create and interact with norms depends on an analysis of the very procedure he mobilises: that which we have previously referred to as the composition of an ‘inventory’ or of an ‘archive’ of practices. Why does Foucault’s research – especially in the way it is presented in the 1980s lecture courses – take the form of an exhaustive inventory of the different forms of what he called the “pragmatics of the self”? 896

As we have seen, the historical distance that separates us from antiquity does not allow us to simply apply these technologies in the present. If our life is characterised by the modern configuration constituted in the nineteenth century with biology and biopolitics, what is the meaning and relevance of this inventory to the present?

My hypothesis is that, through this inventorial procedure, Foucault is tracing a history of norms, a history of a normative activity, which composes and establishes different norms, as well as ways to activate, perform or apply norms to oneself. 897 This procedure, although descriptive, is also critical: it aims at revealing the contingency and the non-necessity of what we are in the present, showing the multiple ways through which we have come to be what we are, and different ways of being that were constituted in the past. In this sense – and in Canguilhemian terms – Foucault’s is an inventory of the solutions given by normativity, of the solutions given by our capacity to create norms throughout history.

From this perspective, Foucault’s history of norms becomes a counter-history: by describing the multiple ways of enacting norms (and, perhaps, ways that were forgotten under several historical layers), it reveals the contingency of norms and shows normativity in action, challenging the apparent necessity and naturality of modern normalisation. By showing normative activity in antiquity, by establishing this rich inventory and repertoire of practices – practices that are plural and different from those by means of which power

895 Canguilhem, “On Histoire de la folie as an event”, in Foucault and his Interlocutors, 29.
896 On the notion of “pragmatics of the self”, GSO, 5.
897 The different modes of subjectivation, which Deleuze (Negotiations, 106) stresses, could be seen precisely as different historical and contingent ways to perform and enact norms, applying them to or upon oneself.
normalises – Foucault shows the non-necessity of this normalisation and the possibility of being other. In this sense, genealogy becomes what Daniele Lorenzini called a ‘possibilising genealogy’, and aims at making other ways of being possible. The opening of this space of possibility, here, could be described as a new deployment of normativity: to break, but also to inaugurate norms, giving “new impetus (...) to the undefined work of freedom”. In this sense, Foucault’s historical undertaking is not merely concerned with revealing other possibilities of life – possibilities that were perhaps forgotten along the way and challenge the monolithic aspect of the present. It also shows how certain possibilities were actualised, how certain norms were chosen and put into work: it describes how we have become what we are, by means which mechanisms, through which events and processes. Foucault characterised his undertaking in the Use of Pleasure, as a critical and philosophical essay to learn to what extent “the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently”. I believe we could rephrase this question in the vocabulary of the norm: the effort of historical analysis of the norms is that of revealing the norms we silently perform, and perhaps, by creating a critical space between ourselves and these norms.

Therefore, if the biotechniques and ancient arts of living are not a material that can be applied to the biopolitical present, they are, however, documents of our normative activity: they show that our norms have not always been the same. As we have seen in Canguilhem’s approach to technique, therapeutics, artefacts and other technical solutions provided us with documents of our ‘polarised’ activity, a history of our polemical engagement with ourselves and with the environment, as well as our effort to change both.

Lorenzini, “On Possibilising Genealogy”, unpublished manuscript (presented at the ‘Foucault at Warwick’ symposium, November 2018). Lorenzini’s argument is that the genealogical procedure invites us to form a community of action, to identify ourselves with those marginalised, silenced and oppressed practices and forms of being subjects in history. Additionally, Lorenzini shows that the notion (and the practice) of critique in Foucault’s thought are inseparable from a critical approach to critique itself: he shows that in the same way that Foucault provide rich descriptions of power mechanisms, he also does with resistance and counter-conducts. The critical attitude described by Foucault is not separable from the historical forms of critique he describes.

FR, 46.

In this sense, the ‘inventory of differences’ I have been referring to is not merely an instrument for resistance, nor is it only a sort of repertoire of resources to be employed in the present (we have seen how problematic that reading would be according to Foucault himself: one cannot employ the solutions that other people in a different historical period gave to other problems). It is also the history of our own oppression and disciplining, the history of how we have been governed and how we have become the sort of subjected-subjects we are today. An example of this analysis can be found in Stimilli’s The Debt of the Living. Ascesis and Capitalism (Albany: SUNY, 2017), where a genealogy of capitalist subjectivity based on debt finds a point of support in a genealogy of techniques of the self and asceticism, which points to a critical reading of Foucault’s late work (see, especially, chapter 7).

UP, 9.
I believe that Foucault’s research on the technai tou biou preserves that technical insight: through an analysis of the biotechniques we can visualise a history of a critical and polemical relation to ourselves, others and the world. As Foucault explains:

Among the cultural inventions of mankind there is a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot be reactivated, but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view, which can be very useful as a tool for analysing what’s going on now – and to change it.

The different exercises, tests, and forms of askesis that constitute the ancient repertoire of the technai tou biou, are ‘pictures’ or ‘images’ of a life that was lived in other ways, which is to say, of other ways of applying norms to life. Here, the reference to Canguilhem can help us clarifying this idea. As we have seen, Canguilhem thought of physiology not as a given or accomplished fact but as an inventory of solutions life gives to crises and suffering, to disease and to the experience of normalised norms. In this sense, at each moment of human bio-history, “there lie within us many more physiological possibilities than physiology would tell us about.” In the same way, in Foucault’s history of the norm, our normalised ways of life are only one possible way to relate to norms; the inventory of ancient techniques points to the contingency of our own historical being and the constellation of norms that defines us; adapting Canguilhem’s reflection, we could say that there lie within us many more possible ways of relating to norms than normalisation would

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902 Several textual places could illustrate this polemical relation to oneself, but I believe we could highlight at least two. First, when commenting the figure of the Baudelairian dandy, Foucault claims that the dandy’s aesthetical task of forming and shaping his own existence as a work of art also presupposes a work of refusal – an active refusal of what one is so that one can become other (FR, 41-42; HS, 251). The second example of this relation to oneself which is not merely of self-affirmation – and, therefore, definitely not one of narcissistic self-absorption – is Foucault’s analysis of the knowledge of nature and the spiritual exercises it entails in the lectures of HS. In these lectures, when analysing Seneca’s spiritual exercise of the ‘view from above’, Foucault concludes that one of the main objectives of this form of knowledge and exercises is to achieve a form of freedom that is not confined to the laws of the city, but that is freedom according to nature. One of the distinguishing aspects of this freedom is, precisely, freedom from oneself (HS, 272-273).

903 FR, 349-350.

904 The mere exposition of these different ways of relating to norms (and of these different sets of norms expressed in the biotechniques already plays a role in the task of analysing present norms and challenging them. The procedure here is close to the one Foucault describes in the 1983 interview “Structuralism and Post-Structuralism”, where he characterises historical work as a way to challenge the apparent necessity of practices: “I would say also, about the work of the intellectual, that it is fruitful in a certain way to describe that which is, while making it appear as something that might not be, or that might not be as it is. Which is why this designation or description of the real never has a prescriptive value of the kind, ‘because that is, that will be’. It is also why, in my opinion, recourse to history (...) is meaningful to the extent that history serves to show how that which is has not always been; that is, the things which seem most evident to us are always formed in the confluence of encounters and chances, during the course of a precarious and fragile history” (EW2, 450).

905 NP, 100.
tell us about. The same *plasticity* that Canguilhem found in human life through the intervention collective techniques, Foucault finds in subjectivity, in the relations of self to self and in the techniques that constitute it.

However, the ancient deployment of norms responds to problems that are different from ours. And Foucault is not simply or univocally claiming that the ancient solutions are ‘better’ than ours. As he says in a 1983 interview: “We don’t have to choose between our world and the Greek world”. Solutions are relative to the problems they address. As we have seen with Canguilhem, norms of life always have temporal and spatial coordinates. They are, therefore, situated and situational, having a history and a geography. If we have access to these solutions as documents of a normative force, it is because they were also stabilised in constellations of norms (as it is clear in the different constellations of norms which define each of the ancient Hellenistic schools, for example). Therefore, they are also what Canguilhem called, in the domain of physiology and evolution, “momentary normalisations”. Of course, normalisation here does not refer to the modern power that manages life, but to the stabilisation of the *bios* in the field of certain solutions and existential choices, the fixation of the *bios* within a frame of certain stabilised coordinates. The ancient schools and biotechniques still express what I have previously called the ‘solidification’ of a fluid process in a more or less static form in the context of certain problems and challenges. Normativity, in its turn, cannot be confused with its expressions

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906 FR, 343.
907 Han-Pile suggests an interesting alternative interpretation according to which practices which survive from previous epochs (or historical a priori) can be reinterpreted in the present: Foucault’s approach “enables us to see whether some good (or at least better) aspects of previous épistemè may survive as marginal practices that could be reinterpreted in the light of the current historical a priori…” (Han-Pile, “Foucault, Normativity and Critique as a Practice of the Self”, 89).
908 FR, 350.
909 If, on the one hand, the document records a normative activity and its situational deployment in space and time, on the other, it is not the activity itself, but its result, the crystallisation of a process. Therefore, the constellations of norms of life produced by the ancient schools, which we can access by means of their prescriptive texts and historical testimony of their ways of life, are but a sort of documental evidence of the deployment of this contingent activity and the solutions it proposed to problems that are specific to an epoch. To extent to which Foucault sees an exemplary value in these techniques, or at least practices that can be appropriated remains an open question in scholarship. Despite his insistence in the fact that these practices are ‘neutral’ and that we cannot apply them to the present as if they were an alternative to discipline and power (FR, 343), in some occasions Foucault seem to suggest that there is an analogy between our moral and political condition and that of the Hellenistic period: “I wonder if our problem nowadays is not, in any way, similar to this [Greek an Roman] one, since most of us no longer believe that ethics in founded in religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our moral, personal, private life (...). I am struck by the similarity of problems” (FR, 343).
910 NP, 143.
911 Nevertheless, antiquity cannot be considered as a ‘golden age’ of normativity, it only documents other norms that respond to other historical problems.
and its documents, which are but residual products of its dynamism. Differently from the *forms* it generates (that is, from the specific norms that give form to – or *inform* – a life), normativity is the fluid process of *coming-to-form*. The archive of devices and techniques of the ancient arts of living constitutes, therefore, a document of that which cannot be documented – the movement, activity and dynamism we call normativity.\(^{912}\) It is from the plurality of norms we deduce the activity the engendered them.\(^{913}\)

Additionally, Foucault’s work is also a history of ethics, a genealogy of the desiring subject,\(^{914}\) which means to say that his analysis of antiquity is also a chapter of the history of what we are, and how we came to be what we are. In this sense, the ancient technologies of the self could also be considered part of a history of the *coming-to-form* of the norms that define us today (and therefore not as a life that is the ‘other’ of power, or of a lifeform against a bare life of biopolitics). It is a genealogy of the formation of our own present historical being. From this perspective, the more we understand how the constellation of norms that formed our historical being was constituted, the more we understand the machinery of the norms that govern us, the more chances we have to de-activate or disarm it.

In our reading of Canguilhem we have noted the importance of the experience of disease for both understanding how norms can be experienced as ‘negative’ or ‘repulsive’, and for visualising the emergence of different forms of life. In disease, Canguilhem saw life’s active errancy in the search for new forms. In disease, we found a concrete domain in which to analyse the relation between life and norms. An analogous logic appears in Foucault’s inventory of the techniques of the self: they express an active search for modes of life and ways of being, through an experimentation with different norms. The history of norms of life and of our normative power is, in this sense, a history of the search for forms of life, the technical trials and errors by which we apply, through collective techniques, norms to our life. The perspective of antiquity, by undermining the necessity of our present norms, helps noting that this movement can never stop or, as Foucault writes in his text on Canguilhem, that “man (...) is never completely in the right place, that [he] is destined to ‘err’ and to ‘be

\(^{912}\) In what concerns this duality between what I am here calling *form* and *coming-to-form*, norm and normativity, in the conclusion I will relate it to Foucault’s own work on Binswanger (DE1, 93-147). See “Conclusion” below.

\(^{913}\) Here, in the same way that the thinkers of *analyse réflexive*, in their reading of the transcendental unity of apperception, emphasised that the existence of thought and representation leads us to the position of an activity of synthesis and thinking, I believe that the existence of this archive of different norms leads us to the activity of normativity.

\(^{914}\) UP, 5.
wrong”. There is no final normative solution to our debate with the world and to ourselves; Canguilhem’s teaching shows that the attempt to close the normative process and to eliminate the necessity of life to differ from itself in order to go on living is one of the figures of disease (experienced as normalisation) and relies on an ideology of order which represents life as an accomplished fact. I believe Foucault’s history of norms of life shares and expresses the same point of view.

Therefore, differently from an author like Pierre Hadot, who thinks that there is something ontologically or anthropologically fundamental in the ancient schools (and the particular set of norms each one of them embodies), something that reveals a sort of permanent structure of the human spirit, Foucault (read with Canguilhem) would see in the schools only contingent instantiations and stabilised solutions of an activity, residual forms of an activity of giving form and coming-to-form. Although, in Foucault’s work of the 1980s, the ancient schools constitute a privileged locus of analysis for the concrete, institutional and collective creation, performance and use of norms, the particular norms they propose and the constellations of norms they embody do not provide us with universal solutions. In this sense, Hellenistic and Roman philosophies do not provide a ‘positive’ content for Foucault’s ethics. Even though they embody a relation to norms that is different from the one constituted under normalising power, they do not have an exemplary or prescriptive value, that is, they do not instruct us about how ‘we ought to be’. In this sense, through the analysis of the variety of ‘ways of life’ in antiquity, Foucault is not providing any substantive model of the ‘good life’.

Nevertheless, Foucault’s analysis of the ancient schools reveals something important about the plurality of possible ways in which one can relate to norms, and this is perhaps a lesson to learn from antiquity – which does not contradict Foucault’s critique of an alleged

915 EW2, 476.
916 As Hadot says: “Let me say only that it seems to me that there are universal and fundamental attitudes of the human being, when it strives after wisdom. From this point of view, there is a universal Stoicism, Epicureanism, Socratism, Pyrrhonism and Platonism, which are independent of the philosophical or mythical discourses which pretend to definitively justify them” (Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique. Paris: Albin Michel, 2002, 376). See also Davidson, “Introduction: Pierre Hadot and the Spiritual Phenomenon of Ancient Philosophy”, in Hadot, Philosophy as a Way of Life, Malden: Blackwell, 1995, 34.
917 As Foucault says in 1983: “I don’t think we can find any normalisation, for instance, in Stoic ethics (...). I don’t think that we can say that this kind of ethics was an attempt to normalise the population” (FR, 341).
918 “I think there is no exemplary value in a period which is not our period” (FR, 347).
exemplary value of ancient practices. Not only do the ancient biotechniques constitute the material for a history of the norm written from the perspective of normativity (and against normalisation). In this counter-history of the norm (written by considering the domain of the ancient arts of living), we find an element that was absent, implicit or ‘undertheorised’ in the history of norms from the perspective of normalisation, namely: the element of an active and voluntary performance of and relation to norms. This is the point where Foucault and Hadot converge. The latter defined ancient philosophy through the notion of hairesis, of a radical choice of a way of life. This way of life is composed of a series of existential attitudes through which the individual converts her whole affective life, her global vision of the world:

At least since the time of Socrates, the choice of a way of life has not been located at the end of philosophical activity, like a kind of accessory or appendix. On the contrary, it stands at the beginning, in a complex interrelation with critical reaction to other existential attitudes, with global vision of a certain way of living and of seeing the world, and with voluntary decision itself.

If Foucault’s narratives of the relations between life and norm of the 1970s focused on normalisation and seemed to leave no space for agency (despite Foucault’s emphasis on the mutual implication of power and resistance, of power and freedom), in the 1980s

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919 Here, it seems that If Foucault would certainly agree with Hadot, when the latter writes that it is precisely the “plurality of the ancient schools that is precious”. He would disagree on the cause: if Hadot sees in this plurality a sign of the different ways in which universal and fundamental attitudes of reason can be actualised, Foucault sees the variety of contingent norms of life and modes of subjectivation. On this topic, see Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 273.


921 Hadot, like Peter Brown, was an important reference in Foucault’s incursions in ancient history and ancient philosophy, as is evident in UP, 8, and HS, 216. Unfortunately, given the limited scope of this thesis, I cannot develop the fertile commonality existing between Foucault and Hadot here. I limit myself to point to Orazio Irrera’s paper (“Pleasure and Transcendence of the Self: Notes on a 'Dialogue too soon Interrupted' between Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot”. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 2010), which provides a competent overview of the debate and a critical response to Hadot, as well as to my own previous work on this topic (see Bibliography).

922 Hadot links the concept of ‘school’ to, on the one hand, *scholē* (σχολή, or the Latin *otium*), designating an ‘institution or a doctrinal tendency’ (*What is Ancient Philosophy?* Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, 295). On the other hand, school is also a hairesis, which means ‘attitudes of thought and life’ (101). The school as an institution and a doctrinal tendency can been seen as the organisation (and so the collective, inter-human, relational structuring) of a certain hairesis.

923 The vocabulary and idea of ‘choice’ also appears in Foucault (see, for example, FR, 341).


925 For example: “power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who ‘do not have it’; it invests them, is transmitted by and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them”. He adds that relations of forces are “not univocal; they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each
works, we find the elements for a performative analysis of the norms, a reflection of how different norms were and can be put to work in different contexts. In this pragmatic and performative approach, one of the main insights of the reflection on normalising power is preserved: as we have seen with Macherey, the norm acquires full reality once it is exercised, once it produces effects. However, as Canguilhem suggested in his discussion of social norms, Foucault’s 1980s works show that norms, in human societies, must be “represented, learned, remembered and applied”. 926 Perhaps what Foucault sees in the experience of the ancient arts of living is an illustration of what we could call a ‘pragmatics of the norm’, 927 that is to say, a way to connect norm and life by intentional and voluntary practices and exercises, which depend on different modalities of use and produce different effects. Perhaps, this is one of the theoretical tools that Foucault finds in Hadot: the understanding of philosophy as a process of deliberately and voluntarily applying certain norms to one’s life.

If, via Canguilhem, we come to understand that all life presupposes forms and is essentially ‘form of life’ – that there is no normless life, nor an accomplished fact of life – then, perhaps, through this reference to Hadot, we can visualise how Foucault’s work also seeks to explain how forms of life can be changed, that is, how a plurality of forms can be applied to life, depending on certain choices and exercises; or, to put it differently: that life is not only what happens to us, but also what we voluntarily do with what happens to us; that we can be agents in the process of informing our lives. 928

Foucault’s work on normalisation – and Discipline and Punish in particular – showed how our very self, individuality and the way our life is structured, is the product of certain processes of application, performance of and subjection to norms. In this process, our will, our capacity to choose which norms to apply or refuse seem to be out of the equation. However, in the plurality of the ancient ways of life, philosophical practices and styles of existence, Foucault seems to find a relation to norms that cannot do without choice, decision, conversion. 929 This voluntary aspect of the choice and performance of norms in the
techniques of the self is clear in Foucault’s idea of life as the product of a complex and difficult work of elaboration, which is linked to what he defines as askesis, the work on the self and one’s life, which operates radical transformations.

Here, again, life appears as related to techniques and to norms. Additionally, the relation of informing and giving shape to one’s life is conceived as an aesthetical task: that of producing one’s life as a work of art.

Similarly, to an artist or a craftsman, who employs tools and techniques to achieve a certain oeuvre, the person employing the arts of life, mobilises norms and techniques to transform herself, to give shape to her ethos. As Foucault explains:

I am referring to what might be called the ‘arts of existence’. What I mean by the phrase are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rulers of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.

930 FR, 41.
931 “The idea of the bios as a material for an aesthetic piece of art is something which fascinates me. The idea also that ethics can be a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure. All that is very interesting” (FR, 348).
932 UP, 10-11. In this passage from UP, Foucault clearly associates the notion of ‘life as a work of art’ to an active and voluntary process. I believe the idea of ‘work of art’ Foucault is mobilising here provides us with an interesting framework to analyse the norm: First, it allows us to refer to the norm as a shape or form, which is embodied by the artwork. Moreover, this example portrays a voluntary action which aims at producing a certain oeuvre. This action is the dynamic process that gives shape or form to matter, constituting an object. As we have seen in our analysis of Canguilhem, shape and form are elements of the definition of the norm in its immanence to what it informs: it is a principle of organization, the form of a life or, to use Foucault’s expression “a structure of existence” (FR, 348). Second, it allows us to refer to the norm as criterion and value. In this passage from UP, we can also note that the poetic and productive action which constitutes an artwork follows certain patterns, criteria or values, which in the example are aesthetical. This is another way in which the activity of the art of bios engages and deploys norms – i.e. as the values and criteria that guide the action of information (or attribution of shape, structure, organization), and these values should be embodied by the final product.

It also seems important to add that the notions of ‘aesthetics’ and ‘work of art’ that Foucault is applies to life are fundamentally linked to a technique that works upon (and shapes) matter in specific ways, configuring a particular and unified material object, a model which Foucault seems to import to his own proposition of ‘aesthetics of existence’. His reflection in one of his 1980s interviews: “What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialised, or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?” (FR, 350).

Foucault seems to think of art, in this case, as a form of craftsmanship that is, however, applied to one’s life, body, affects and conduct. Instead of producing exterior material objects (such as “a house or a lamp”), this is an immanent form of craftsmanship, applied to the agent himself. In this sense, it is important to stress that in the idea of ‘work of art’, Foucault emphasises the pole of the ‘work’, of systematic action upon oneself, through a difficult process, which implies complex relations to norms. This idea of ‘work’ leads us to the last idea that I would like to stress in this analogy between our relation to norms and the work of art. We have seen, in our definition of norm and normativity in
How could we think lines of continuity, especially considering the difference between a modern, biological and organic concept of life and the Greek idea of a qualified life expressed in the notion of bios? How could the reflections on the bios be relevant in our biopolitical present? It is legitimate to think that Foucault’s analysis of the ancient arts of living is not only a chapter in the genealogy of the modern subject, but also points to a critical task in the present, which responds to a question of the present. However, we can only think and experience the possibility of creating ways of life from within the context of a modern, politicised, notion of life, just like, to quote Veyne’s analogy, “fishes” [poissons] in the “fishbowl” [bocal] that our time constitutes. For it is from within life, as defined by the modern experience in which we are situated, that is possible for us to think and perhaps accomplish the ethical task of creating new forms and norms of life.

9.2. The Critical and Ethopoetic Task of Philosophy

Thinking philosophy as a way of life today implies, for Foucault, referring to the ancient model of philosophising. Nevertheless, we can no longer “be Greek”. In his view, this would not even be desirable. Foucault also underlines this distance separates us from the Canguilhem, that norms are defined in a debate or in a polemic engagement with the environment. This image of a polemical debate with the environment and one’s own condition (centred upon the idea of crisis and disease) could appear to us a merely reactive process, which could seem merely a sort of ‘problem-solving’ quality of our normative activity. Perhaps Foucault’s image of the production of an ‘artwork’ would more efficiently suggest an active, selective, creative, voluntary and intentional process of engagement with norms. According to Wimberley, through this analogy with the artwork, Foucault highlights our “ability to invent and modify norms” (“The Joy of Difference”, 197). Mauer, on the other hand, characterises this process as a stylisation of our relationship to norms (Foucault et le problème de la vie, 188).

The problem that Foucault diagnoses in the present is that of the formation of an ethics “as a form to give to one’s conduct and to one’s life” (DE2, 1493).

933 “L’a connaissance historique (…), si elle veut pousser jusqu’à son terme ses analyses d’une époque donnée, doit parvenir (…) aux vérités générales dans lesquelles les esprits de cette époque étaient, à leur insu, enfermés comme des poissons dans un bocal”. Veyne, Foucault, sa personne, sa pensée, 11.

935 As Foucault clearly says in 1984, “Généalogie veut dire que je mène l’analyse à partir d’une question présente” (DE2, 1493).

936 For example, in the 1983 Berkeley interview with Dreyfus and Rabinow, “Foucault says that “you can’t find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another time by other people” (FR, 343), and he adds that, in this sense, Greek ethics cannot be an alternative for us today. He says: “The Greek ethics were linked to a purely virile society with slaves, in which the women were underdogs whose pleasure had no importance, whose sexual life had to be only oriented toward, determined by, their status as wives, and so on” (FR, 344). Later, he says that “Greek ethics of pleasure
ancients and their *repertoire* of philosophical practices in his explanation of the “Cartesian moment” in the *Hermeneutics of the subject*; that is to say, the separation of philosophy and spirituality.937

Nevertheless, Foucault seems to see the creation of new ways of life as the urgent task of the present, and this is one of the ways in which he justifies his incursion in antiquity. There is a clear passage in the 1982 lectures in which the reading of ancient philosophy is situated under the rubric of a more general task for the present, namely that of reactivating and ethics of the self:

And in this series of undertakings to reconstitute an ethic of the self, in this series of more or less blocked and ossified efforts, and in the movement we now make to refer ourselves constantly to this ethic of the self without ever giving it any content, I think we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.938

In this context, Foucault presents this political concern with resistance to power as the need to integrate the ethics of the self to the study of what he calls “governmentality”.939

The idea is that the relations of government (that encompass both power and resistance), pass through the relation that we have with ourselves,940 and this relation is understood as one of the defining features of a way of life. Therefore, the invention of an ethics of the self remains an urgent political task of the present since it can intervene and transform the general economy of forces and ways in which one is governed. As Foucault explains:

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937 See HS, 6 January 1982, first hour. The “Cartesian moment” identifies a series of processes in the history of thought, especially in the history of the subject-truth relation – and not necessarily connected with Descartes' work – that separate philosophy from the exigencies of spirituality and disqualifies the care of the self.

938 HS, 252.

939 HS, 252; see GL, 12; EW3, 201-238. For an analysis of the transformations that the notion of *governmentality* introduces in Foucault's analysis of power (in contrast to the war-based model), focusing particularly on BB and STP, see Patton, "From Resistance to Government. Foucault’s Lectures 1976-1979", in *A Companion to Foucault*, edited by C. Falzon, T. O’Leary and J. Sawicki. Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, 2013, 172-188.

940 A different version of this theme appears in DP. When explaining the idea of *panopticism*, Foucault argues that “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and he who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constrains of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (DP, 202-203).
[I]f we take the question of power, of political power, situating it in the more general question of governmentality understood as a strategic field of power relations in the broadest (...) sense of the term, if we understand by governmentality a strategic field of power relations in their mobility (...) then I do not think that a reflection on this notion of governmentality can avoid passing through, theoretically and practically, the element of a subject defined by the relationship of self to self. (...) [I]t seems to me that the analysis of governmentality – that is to say, of power as a set of reversible relationships – must refer to an ethics of the subject defined self to self.941

The notion of governmentality appears, then, as a key element for establishing the connection between the published works of the 1970s and the published and unpublished material of the 1980s. It also helps us understanding the relevance of Foucault’s analyses of the ancient technologies of the self for the task of constituting an ethics capable of intervening in the general economy of power today. Nevertheless, what remains unclear is how the vast range of material described and reconstructed by Foucault (such as a whole set of dietary and medical practices, exercises of examination of consciousness, techniques regarding attention, forms of meditation, etc) could be mobilised in the present for the constitution of an ethics, and beyond a genealogy of the particular austere practices that historically constituted us as moral subjects.

If the problem of government seems to be a sufficient answer to the question on how to situate the techniques of the self (and the individual or collective government of one’s own life) in terms of its relevance for contemporary configurations of power and resistance, it is still insufficient to clarify the idea of an ethics fundamentally concerned with the creation of a way of life and the relationships between this ethics and Foucault’s inventory of ancient forms of life. There remains, therefore, a gap between the practices of life of the ancients and the modern horizon of life and biopolitics. Still, Foucault – somehow paradoxically – justifies his enterprise in the lectures of the Hermeneutics of the Subj by arguing that the contemporary urgency of constituting an ethics of the self passes through an attentive reading of ancient philosophy. Indeed, through this reading, Foucault discovers the ethopoetic aspect of ancient philosophy, that is to say, its vocation to create ways of being and forms of life.942 Nonetheless, the link between these philosophical practices and

941 HS, 252.
942 One of the main aspects of spirituality and the spiritual forms of knowledge is its transformative effect upon the subject’s mode of being. As Foucault explains, “The Greeks had a very interesting word [...]. It exists in the form of a noun, a verb, and adjective. It is the expression, or series of expressions, of words: étapoiein, étapolia, étapoios. Étapoiein means making étos, producing étos, changing, transforming étos, the individual’s way of being, his mode of existence. Étapoios is something that possesses the quality of transforming an individual’s mode of being...” (HS, 237).
resistance to contemporary political power does not seem clear, for the ethos that each school developed, responded to specific and historically contingent problems. Given their historical specificity, which contents and tools could the ancient schools offer to the contemporary political issues?

One could perhaps understand the *ethopoetic* as one of the key points of articulation between the tasks proposed by the ancient philosophical schools and the urgency of creating an ethics capable of articulating new ways of life for the present. Another textual place which could connect the *ethopoetic* problematic to the ethical and political task of creating ways of life is the 1981 interview “Friendship as a Way of Life”. This text is contemporary to Foucault’s exploration of the ancient philosophical ways of life – including the ancient notion of friendship – at the *Collège de France*, and I believe it can shed light on the developments of the lecture course. It reviews, from a different angle, concerns which are very close to those developed in the lectures.

The interview first appeared in the journal *Gai Pied*, founded by Jean Le Bitoux, who an important figure in the struggle against homophobia and LGBT rights activist. The interview marks a moment of clear *prise de position* by Foucault, in which he states an ethical and existential commitment to this struggle.

In the interview, Foucault engages with the critique of the apparatuses of individualisation as well as the confessional practices linked to a *dispositif* of sexuality or to a disciplinary politics of identity. According to Foucault, one must “distrust the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of “Who am I?” and “What is the secret of my desire?” Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, “What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?” As Foucault explains, the fundamental question concerns forms of friendship which would be possible ways of co-creating norms of life, that is to say, forms of living with others which are not normalised or normalising. For Foucault, this experimental idea of friendship corresponds to

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943 EW1, 135-140. The importance of this interview in for an understanding of Foucault’s idea of critique was also highlighted by Han-Pile, “Foucault, Normativity and Critique as Practice of the Self” and by Le Blanc, *Canguilhem et les normes*.

944 See, for example, the reflections on Epicurean friendship in the second hour of the 3 February 1982 lecture, where “friendship is one of the forms given to the care of the self” (HS, 195).

945 The journal had an important role in the gay struggles of the time and was published by the editorial group *Éditions du Triangle Rose* and printed by the Communist Revolutionary League.

946 EW1, 135.
an existence to be created, through forms which are not institutionalised, fixed and
normalised (as is the family, for instance).

According to Foucault, friendship in this context is, fundamentally, a question of
inventing “from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless”. Therefore, the struggle consists
in developing forms of friendship which would be *ethopoetic*, which is to say that the struggle
is one for creating modes of life:

This notion of mode of life seems important to me. Will it require the
introduction of a diversification different from the ones due to social class,
differences in profession and culture, a diversification that would also be a
form of relationship and would be a “way of life”? A way of life can be shared
among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield
intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized. It seems to
me that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics. To be “gay,” I think, is
not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the
homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life.

In the context of this interview as well as in the affirmation of philosophy’s task today
as the creation or the reconstruction of an ethics of the self in *The Hermeneutics of the
Subject*, Foucault does *not* prescribe particular forms of life or a set of specific norms to
follow. It is possible to note, in his emphasis on the creative task of friendship, an open-
ended process which can somehow respond to some of the questions posed in the 1981-
1982 lecture course. Additionally, one could speculate that perhaps Foucault is able to
diagnose the necessity of creating an ethics of the self today because he sees different
attempts of establishing it already emerging in the social space, and one of these attempts
appears in “Friendship as Way of Life”. Furthermore, and given this synchronicity, how
could we ignore the fact that there is, in these reflections on friendship, an analogous logic
to that of the collective constitution of norms of life that Foucault finds in the ancient
philosophical schools in the lecture courses?

In the ancient schools it is possible to find a *collective* dimension of the practices of
the self: the radical existential option which constitutes the school is fundamentally
collective and presupposes a whole series of social relations. In the same way, “Friendship
as a Way of Life” shows the space of the group as a site of resistance, in which forms of life

947 EW1, 136.
948 EW1, 137-138.
949 This is related to the philosophical ethos of critique of the present and to the “historical ontology”
of ourselves, which Foucault describe in “What is Enlightenment”. In that text, the historico-critical
attitude appeared as an “experimental one”: “this work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the
one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, a test of reality, of contemporary
reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable” (FR, 46).
are constituted. Rather than a lonely or isolated individual hopelessly confronted with and interpellated by social norms, Foucault shows us a group of people who create and share norms, which then operate as counter-norms and oppose the norms of normalising power and disciplinary institutions. The collective dimension appears in the two cases (contemporary experimental friendship and the ancient school) in the context of what Le Blanc calls “micro-norms”. Its political dimension is that of an “infra-politics”, to employ the phrase Melissa Lane uses to characterise Epicureanism. Nevertheless, I believe this dimension is not exhaustive when it comes to Foucault’s view of the collective creation of different ways of life: he also saw this dimension of production of shared norms in mass

950 Le Blanc, “Becoming a Subject in Relation to Norms”, in Cremonesi, Irrera, Lorenzini, Tazzioli, Foucault and the Making of Subjects, 129-135. Le Blanc explains: “The way a subject refers to norms and conducts itself in the way it refers to them implies the creation of micro-norms (...). The category of ‘use’ developed by the late Foucault suggests the creation of such micro-norms” (134).
movements. Both in the context of the group and in that of the masses, the question seems to be for the conditions that: make “the future formation of a ‘we’ possible”.

If, in the previous chapters we have seen how norms relate to life in discipline and biopolitics, and if “human existence is confronted with norms”, the reading of texts such as “Friendship as a Way of Life” can show that “not all individual social norms are normising/normalising”. In my exposition of this text, I have immediately referred the notion of way of life to that of norm, suggesting that the creating a way of life is an expression of normative activity.

Therefore, from within the relationship that biopolitical modernity establishes between life and norm, I believe it is possible to think – from viewpoint of Canguilhem’s conceptual tools – the link between the Foucauldian analyses of biopolitics and

952 The problem of the transformative potential of the need to live differently and the task of organising collective norms of life differently also appear in Foucault’s work from the perspective of mass movements. The most striking example of this is perhaps Foucault’s view on the beginnings of the Iranian Revolution. See EW3, 449-453. The introduction of mass movements and the attempts Foucault sees in them (especially in the case of the Iranian Revolution) to constitute new collective ways of life, new collective subjects and new norms would lead us to an analysis of what we could call ‘political normativity’. If both vital norms and ethical norms are in a certain sense political, exploring these different collective movements would help us noting the operation of norms in the political sphere, where governmental practices are challenged and other (new, different divergent) collective forms of self-government emerge. In this sense, the Canguilhemian reading I propose could include a specifically political normativity (in addition to biological and ethical conceptions of life and normativity). Through the Canguilhemian-based notion of normativity, we could revisit the Foucauldian debate on government; if I speak of an alter-normativity to think Foucault’s critical ethos, I would like to suggest the possibility of speaking of an alter-governmentality as a way to interpret Foucault’s approach to politics beyond the domain of small groups. From this viewpoint, the creation of norms and ways of life (which, I content, Foucault privileges in his analysis) is also a task for political self-government, and it could be seen from the same experimental and ‘erratic’ perspective that Canguilhem’s notion of normativity. Perhaps, from this perspective, one could revisit Foucault’s question: “What would really be the governmentality appropriate to socialism? Is there a governmentality appropriate to socialism? What governmentality is possible as a strictly, intrinsically, and autonomously socialist governmentality? In any case, we know only that if there is a really socialist governmentality, then it is not hidden within socialism and its texts. It cannot be deduced from them. It must be invented” (BB, 94). For reasons of length, I am limited to only suggesting this topic here. I am grateful to Paul Patton, whose provocative reading of my work pointed to this possible line of investigation, which I intend to develop in a future project. I believe we can read one of Patton’s explorations of liberalism in Foucault’s thought (as well as his interpretation regarding the complementarity between Foucault’s and Rawls’ approaches) as an attempt to think this political normativity, although I disagree with the specific political and normative content he sees in Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism and governmentality in BB. See Patton, “Government, Rights and Legitimacy: Foucault and Liberal Political Normativity”. European Journal of Political Theory, Vol. 15(2), 2016, 223-239; see also Patton’s “Foucault and Normative Political Philosophy”, in Foucault and Philosophy, edited by T. O’Leary & C. Falzon. Malden-Oxford: Blackwell, 2010, 204-221.

953 FR, 385.

954 Macherey, De Canguilhem à Foucault, 98.

governmentality and the ethical and political task of creating ways of life. We can also situate both the description of the practices of ancient technologies of the self and the practices Foucault describes in “Friendship as a Way of Life” as two different, but nevertheless convergent ways to think the norm from the perspective of normativity, that is to say, the normative capacity to live in a different way. In this sense, in both contexts Foucault finds normative practices that challenge the necessity of existing norms and forms of living. Both express Foucault’s concern with a pragmatics of the norm: ways of choosing, performing, enacting and living by norms. Or, putting it in different words, ways of voluntarily applying the norm to one’s existence, which involves an interplay of power and freedom.

Following the line of problematisation proposed by Foucault, our task in the present is the ethopoetic creation of norms of life “against the impoverishment of the relational fabric.” Foucault’s work on the ancients shows ways in which norms were applied to life by means of processes and dynamics which are far removed from the normalising and disciplinary apparatuses that govern individuals and populations in the present. As we have seen, Foucault does not advocate for the adoption of these particular norms, which echoes our reading of Canguilhem, for whom social and collective norms are never ‘necessary’. On the contrary, critical activity would mean reactivating the task of normativity. This is what appears in “Friendship as a Way of Life”: Foucault identifies a new space of possible normative activity, an open-ended task to be undertaken in the present. And in relation to this normative task, “we are always in the position of beginning again”.

9.3. From Anti-Normativity to Alternormativity

In Foucauldian scholarship, the notions of norm and normativity tend to be associated with the ways in which power and governmental practices operate. In this context, the idea of norm is usually seen with critical distance and suspicion. This is also true when it comes to what we could call a positive view of the norm, that is to say, a view which would not describe the functioning of modern government of life, but rather constitute the grounds for the

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956 “Society and the institutions that frame it have limited the possibility of relationships because a rich relational world would be very complex to manage. We should fight against the impoverishment of the relational fabric” (EW1, 158).
957 Reconnecting or referring existing norms back to the normative activity that establishes than could also be seen as that which Foucault defines as the fruitful aspect of the work of an intellectual: “to describe that-which-is by making it appear as something that might not be, or might not be as it is” (EW2, 450).
958 FR, 47.
critique of intolerable forms and effects of power. Foucault’s approach would be equally suspicious of forms of criticism that would step into the realm of prescription and would set the task of providing normative grounds for social and political practices or pointing to a specific programme or path of social transformation. A clear example of this suspicion appears in his debate with Noam Chomsky, “Human Nature: Justice versus Power”.\(^{959}\) In this debate, Foucault is not only attacking the ‘normative-normalising’ functioning of power in our society, nor is he only refuting a form of conservative social action which prescribes ways to reconduct alleged social deviance to the norm (to employ Canguilhem’s characterisation of the ‘quantitative thesis’). While criticising the effects of power (and even mobilising a Marxist vocabulary),\(^{960}\) Foucault is also concerned with the potentially dangerous and oppressive effects of prescription – even in proposals of radical transformation.

In the debate, Chomsky argues that forms of coercion, repression or autocratic control cannot be intrinsically justified, and must therefore be eliminated.\(^{961}\) As he explains, the intellectual task of understanding the nature of these relations of power in society cannot be separated from another important endeavour: that creating an image, a vision of a future just society.\(^{962}\) Therefore, the reference to the normative notion of justice, he claims, is essential to any attempt of radical social transformation: achieving and promoting justice is the ultimate justification of critique and political action. For Chomsky, however, this notion of justice can only be rightly understood if we posit a “humanitarian social theory founded upon a solid concept of human nature”.\(^{963}\) The latter would provide us with notions such as dignity, freedom and that which is the cornerstone of Chomsky’s approach: creativity and creative activity. From this perspective, a just society would be characterised by a social structure that would allow these fundamental human qualities to flourish, in a word, a society where a life would become human in the full sense of the term. It is the reference to these qualities and to this notion of justice (which is linked to their fulfilment) that provides the normative grounds for resisting and fighting against the current social practices of

\(^{959}\) DE1, 1339-1380.

\(^{960}\) For example: “Il est tout aussi clair que nous vivons sous un régime de dictature de classe, de pouvoir de classe qui s’impose par la violence, même quand les instruments de cette violence sont institutionnels et constitutionnels” (DE1, 1363). In different moments of the debate, Foucault seems to make clear that his position is not anti or counter-revolutionary. While Chomsky seems have a clearer stance against violence in the process of social transformation (even though claiming he is not entirely a pacifist), Foucault seems to include violence into the picture.

\(^{961}\) DE1, 1362.

\(^{962}\) DE1, 1364-1365.

\(^{963}\) DE1, 1365.
oppression and control. It is only by setting oneself this perhaps utopian goal (and Chomsky provides a clear image of how a libertarian socialist society would be structured according to an anarcho-syndicalist perspective) that one can expect to achieve any possible victory in the particular struggles for justice.

Foucault, however, sees in prescription and in the reference to a pre-established or ideal image of a future society precisely one of the dangers (and perhaps temptations) of theory in relation to existing oppressive social practices. For Foucault, Chomsky’s reference to human nature as the criterion grounding critique and the guiding principle for the organisation of a new order is still a product of our own time and its relations of power and forms of knowledge:

Vous ne pouvez pas m’empêcher de croire que ces notions de nature humaine, de justice, de réalisation de l’essence humaine sont des concepts qui ont été formés à l’intérieur de notre civilisation, dans notre type de savoir, dans notre forme de philosophie, et que, par conséquent, ça fait partie de notre système de classes, et qu’on ne peut pas, aussi regrettable que ce soit, faire valoir ces notions pour décrire ou justifier un combat qui devrait (…) bouleverser les fondements mêmes de notre société.

According to this view, the concepts that would allegedly allow for a radical reorganisation of society actually risk carrying with them the structures and presuppositions of our own society. What we see re-emerging here is the problem of what Veyne called the “bocal” of our own time and its own historical limits. In the same way that, for Foucault, we cannot simply mobilise practices of the past to ‘solve’ the problems of the present, we also cannot simply anticipate the future by employing concepts of the present. Following Foucault’s response to Chomsky, we note that these concepts bear the mark of our own situatedness: they were developed within the limits of our own historical a priori and the

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964 As Chomsky explains, these fundamental human qualities are the the ground upon which a “true notion of justice” is founded (DE1, 1373). One must, then, be able to justify one’s action on the basis of justice and the flourishing of fundamental human qualities, which are currently repressed and blocked by current forms of social oppression: “Dans ces cas-là, si on n’est pas capable de justifier ce combat, il faut l’abandonner. On doit montrer que la révolution sociale que l’on conduit est menée à une fin de justice” (DE1, 1373).

965 “Un système fédéré, décentralisé de libres associations, incorporant des institutions économiques et sociales, constituierait ce que j’appelle l’anarcho-syndicalisme ; il me semble que c’est la forme appropriée d’organisation sociale pour une société technologique avancée, dans laquelle les êtres humains ne sont pas transformés en instruments, en rouages du mécanisme. Aucune nécessité sociale n’exige plus que les êtres humains soient traités comme des maillons de la chaîne de production ; nous devons vaincre cela par une société de liberté et de libre association, où la pulsion créatrice inhérente à la nature humaine pourra se réaliser de la façon qu’elle décidera” (DE1, 1363).

966 DE1, 1367.

967 DE1, 1374.

968 Veyne, Foucault, sa personne, sa pensée, 11.
forms of oppression and power structures within which we are situated. Pre-establishing what the future society would look like would risk perpetuating the forms of power of the present one. Additionally, it seems that another reason why Foucault would be suspicious of providing normative grounds is that this approach would have a normalising effect over existing social practices, as if the intellectual had the last word about why and how to fight against oppression. From this viewpoint, perhaps imperfect but existing practices of resistance and counter-conduct would be seen as deviant, unjustified, superfluous, independently of the potential they could have for generating new norms, new ways of life, and new forms of subjectivity. This ‘normativist’ view would prioritise closed norms over the dynamic process of normativity – the lived process by means of which new norms come to be. The risk of mobilising positive norms and forms of prescription would be that of closing a process in which new possibilities emerge, ignoring the possibility of a slow and precarious discovery of new forms of life which takes place in existing social practices and struggles.969

In this sense, Foucault’s thought would be, as Mark Kelly argued, “anti-normative”,970 and the positive notion of norm as the foundation of critique would be foreign to or, at least, absent from his work. Kelly claims that against a “normativist counterrevolution” that happened in political thought in the 1970s, “Foucault pushes in a different direction, for a political thought that stands against normativity”.971 This suspicion regarding the notion of norm, according to Dianna Taylor,972 is consistent with a response to the criticism articulated by Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser, which stressed a normative deficit in Foucault’s work, or to what Kelly called “normativising misreadings”,973 which argued that one of the problematic aspects of Foucault’s work is the fact that it does not provide normative grounds for critique. According to Oksala, these readings “claim that, despite Foucault’s explicit critical intentions, his thought nevertheless makes political critique impossible because of its lack of philosophically articulated normative grounding”.974 Let us now have a closer look at Habermas’ approach to this issue.

969 Here we note an interesting nuance in Foucault’s work: if his emphasis on ancient biotechniques seemed to show ways in which norms can be voluntarily applied to life, his attention to the emergence of new forces in social struggles seems to point to other forms in which an existing norm is broken and different norms emerge.
971 Kelly, For Foucault, 3.
973 Kelly, For Foucault, vii.
974 Oksala, How to Read Foucault, 87.
Habermas’ critique of Foucault is articulated in three steps. First, he claims, Foucault reduces the understanding of meaning of social practices by participants (or “the hermeneutical elucidation of the contexts of meaning”)\(^\text{975}\) to an explanation of discourse, which is an “analysis of structures that are meaningless in themselves”.\(^\text{976}\) Second, Foucault reduces “validity claims” to mere effects of power.\(^\text{977}\) And, finally, Foucault reduces the “ought” to the “is”: “value judgements – in general, the problem of justifying critique – are excluded in favour of a value free historical explanation”,\(^\text{978}\) which would ultimately amount to saying that Foucault’s work is non-normative, an “ascetic description of kaleidoscopically changing practices of power”.\(^\text{979}\)

Much has been written on Habermas’ assessment of Foucault’s work, and it is not my intention here to reconstruct this debate, nor to provide a systematic refutation of the criticism. Rather, my aim is to reconsider the problem that critical theorists identified in Foucault’s work, attempting to revisit the relation between normativity and critique from the perspective of our reading of Canguilhem. Thus, by briefly looking at the criticism elaborated by Habermas and other critical theorists, my objective is less that of providing a final response, than to use their insight to revisit this problem in Foucault’s work from the hermeneutic perspective I have proposed at the very beginning of this thesis. I believe that by reconsidering Habermas’ and Fraser’s criticism from the perspective of a renewed notion of normativity, we can achieve new insights on the ways in which Foucault’s work is ‘critical’ and how this critique operates.

I would like to draw attention to Habermas’ third line of criticism; namely, the problem of the justification of critique: the exclusion of all prescriptive quality (i.e. the reduction of ‘ought’ to ‘is’) as well as the absence of a clear standard, value or criterion of evaluation, would have led Foucault to a dead end in what concerns the possibility of criticising current practices, concepts and institutions and indicate paths of possible social transformation. In Habermas’s account, while failing to provide the normative foundations of his critique of power, Foucault nevertheless presents genealogy as a “tactic and a tool for waging battle against a normatively unassailable formation of power”.\(^\text{980}\) However, in his

\(^{975}\) Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 275.
\(^{976}\) Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 275.
\(^{977}\) Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 276
\(^{978}\) Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 275.
\(^{979}\) Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 275.
\(^{980}\) Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 283.
view, the weapon itself is superfluous if one does not know why to employ it, why to fight. Although it is clear that Foucault thinks of his work as a ‘toolbox’ for resistance and counter-power, what is not clear is why should we resist in the first place. Or, in Fraser’s words, “why is struggle preferable to submission? Why ought domination to be resisted?” As she spells out, “only with the introduction of normative notions of some kind could Foucault begin to answer these questions”. In this sense, from Habermas’ perspective, there is an inconsistency in Foucault’s exclusion of normative and prescriptive stances, and his insistence on the critical and emancipatory role of genealogy. Nevertheless, I think it is important to remark that although noting this apparent normative deficit and the absence of an explicit normative ground that would allow for the critique of practices that Foucault analyses and describes in his genealogies, Habermas also notes Foucault’s critical intention. It is clear for Habermas that Foucault’s aim is that of offering tools for challenging

981 “But if it is just a matter of mobilising counter-power, of strategic battles and wily confrontations, why should we muster any resistance at all against this all-pervasive power circulating in the bloodstream of modern society, instead of just adapting ourselves to it?” (Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 283-284).

982 A possible response to this question – slightly different from the one I will develop here – would consist in simply inverting the order and priority of terms in the relation between resistance to power and intellectual or historico-philosophical work. If Habermas and Fraser seem to think that practices of resistance to power are made possible by a normative ground that would make power appear as unjust; for Foucault, the relationship between resistance and theory seems to be quite the opposite: instead of choosing to provide reasons to resist power, as if the passage to action was a sort of ultimate consequence of (and, therefore, depending on) philosophical grounding, which would through justified reasons show that this power should be countered, Foucault seems to situate the “non-acceptability of power” as the very reason why his theoretical work on particular institutions and their functioning is first developed. The existence of concrete practices of resistance point to possible foci of historical investigation. As Foucault explains in a lecture, the “non-acceptability of power” is “not at the end of the enterprise, but at the beginning of the work, in the form of a questioning of all the ways in which power is actually accepted” (GL, 78). While Habermas and Fraser seem to be asking ‘why shouldn’t we accept (and happily join) this form of power?’ (which would amount to asking for the normative grounds and concepts that allow us to evaluate these forms of power as ‘bad’ or ‘unjust’), Foucault seems to be asking a different question: ‘how have we come to accept forms of power that are unacceptable – or that are lived as such by the actors who experience them?’. In this sense, as Foucault claims in GL, his approach integrates a certain form of anarchism, not however as a normative political position, nor as an image of a socialist society free of State power, which would serve as a model from which to evaluate current practices as negative and oppressive, as Chomsky suggested in the debate on “Justice and Human Nature” (see DE1, 1364-1365). In GL, anarchism appears as a methodological disposition or dispositive according to which no power is necessary; the social analyst has as one of his tasks to reveal the effects of power, to bring into the analysis the perception of struggles and social actors that have experienced power as intolerable. I intend to develop this strategic and methodological use of anarchism by Foucault in future work.

983 Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 283.

984 She adds: “Only with the introduction of normative notions could he begin to tell us what is wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it”. In “Foucault’s Body-Language. A Post-Humanist Political Rhetoric” (Salmagundi, 61, 1983, 56), she exemplifies the sort of humanist notions grounding “modern normative criticism”: “autonomy, reciprocity, mutual recognition, dignity and human rights.”
technologies of power. This leads him to suggest that, if we wish to consider Foucault’s work as critical (and therefore not as a mere description of the power apparatuses), we then must admit that it presupposes normative grounds that are not clearly articulated; in this sense, maintaining that Foucault’s work is critical would amount to supporting the claim that its normative grounds are hidden, which is what Habermas characterises as Foucault’s *cryptonormativism*: the “arbitrary partisanship of a criticism that cannot account for its own normative foundations”.  

Habermas leaves us with two possibilities: either Foucault’s work is simply marked by a lack of normative grounds, and is therefore conservative; or it is critical and its normative grounds are not explicitly articulated. However, this characterisation seems to presuppose a very narrow idea of critique (and of notions of norm and normativity, which would be both incompatible with the tasks Foucault sets for the intellectual – and the way these notions are characterised in his work).  

In Taylor’s view, “the uncritical acceptance of Habermasian notions of the norm and normativity necessarily posits Foucault’s work as non-normative and therefore ethically and politically irrelevant or harmful”. If there is no positive proposition of particular norms in Foucault, and yet we admit that his work is critical, should we immediately concede that Foucault’s work is cryptonormative? Or could we suppose that the idea of social critique in Foucault must operate differently from the way in which this Habermasian line of criticism assumes?  

Habermas seems to think that the role of the intellectual is to explicitly articulate a set of values, and that critique would consist in referring facts to these values, asserting that some of these facts are not how they ought to be, providing both the reasons and the weapons or tools to undertake a struggle that would aim at breaching this gap. In this sense, social criticism would presuppose the possibility of comparing a current state of affairs to these implicit values.

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985 Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 276.
986 Here, it is important to add that the notions of norm and normativity presupposed in Habermas’ and Fraser’s accounts differ radically from the way we have defined these notions in our reading of Canguilhem.
988 In other words, this prudent and critical distance from the idea of ‘norm’ as the alleged core of any critical philosophy, shows that the accusation made against Foucault’s work presupposes an uncritical acceptance of a very specific definition of critique, and that this uncritical theoretical attitude is inconsistent with its own critical social claims. As Taylor argues “it is only through critical interrogation of what has been presupposed or uncritically accepted that the emancipatory potential of any philosophy (...) can be explored” (Taylor, “Normativity and Normalization”, 48).
989 A more humble version of the role of the norm is to say that it functions as a sort of regulative principle that serves as the criterion for action – and for an evaluation and improvement of these action.
to an ideal or norm (communicative reason and Verständigung, for Habermas\textsuperscript{990} or, as we have seen with Chomsky, a just society understood as a social structure which would allow for the flourishing and fulfilment of fundamental human characteristics) – a procedure that seems to echo the sort of conceptual dispositive employed by the ‘quantitative thesis’ and its normative and normalising stance, which Canguilhem denounced.\textsuperscript{991} As Patton explains, this sort of normative political thought would propose “a form of critique that relies on the differences between the ideal and the real, or between the detailed conception of principles of a just social order and the reality of existing institutions and practices”.\textsuperscript{992} Additionally, he argues, this “kind of critical political thought is committed to the detailed elaboration of concepts of justice, freedom, equality and legitimate government”.\textsuperscript{993} Critique would then be able to say why something is “bad” (by reference to these concepts), providing reasons and justification on why not to adhere to certain practices or institutions.

If critique is thus defined, Foucault’s work would appear as non-critical or, alternatively, as critical but crypto-normative in nature – unless we could think of a form of critique that would be non-normative. Kelly seems to suggest something along these lines: that it is rather in its “anti-normative” quality that Foucault’s work is critical.\textsuperscript{994} This qualification of “anti-normative” derives from the fact that Foucault does not prescribe positive norms nor articulates explicit political programs for social transformation, but rather diagnoses the political and governmental rationalities, their norms and normalising agenda. Foucault could be said to be anti-normative precisely in the sense that his critique consists in making visible the norms through which we are governed, and which are embodied in modern institutions.\textsuperscript{995} If we take Discipline and Punish as an example,\textsuperscript{996} we note that this

\textsuperscript{990} According to Kenneth Baynes, “Habermas’ claim is that an analysis and reconstruction of the conditions of Verständigung (or mutual understanding) can provide a normative foundation for social criticism. In this sense, he pursues by different means Kant’s attempt to develop normative principles for social criticism from a notion of practical (communicative) reason” (The Normative Grounds of Social Criticism. Kant, Rawls and Habermas. New York: SUNY, 1992).

\textsuperscript{991} As we have seen in Canguilhem’s analysis, this procedure of referring an existing fact to a fixed norm is defined as normalisation.

\textsuperscript{992} Patton, “Government, Rights and Legitimacy”, 224.

\textsuperscript{993} Patton, “Government, Rights and Legitimacy”, 224.

\textsuperscript{994} See Kelly, For Foucault.

\textsuperscript{995} As Foucault explains in 1974: “L’une des taches qui me paraît urgente, immédiate (...) est la suivante : nous devons indiquer et montrer, même lorsqu’elles sont cachées, toutes les relations du pouvoir politique qui contrôle actuellement le corps social” (DE1, 1363). He continues: “Il me semble que, dans une société comme la nôtre, la vraie tâche politique est de critiquer le jeu des institutions apparemment neutres et indépendantes ; de les critiquer et de les attaquer de telle manière que la violence politique qui s’exerçait obscurément en elles soit démasquée et qu’on puisse lutter contre elles” (DE1, 1364). Foucault adds that power has unknown and invisible centres and points of application; bringing them to light is part of the task of the critic.

\textsuperscript{996} See DP, “Panopticism”.
task consists precisely of short-circuiting the economy of visibility presupposed by power relations. If power consists in ‘making visible’ both its field and objects of application, while at the same time making itself invisible, then critique reverses the vector of visibility: instead of objectifying the practices of resistance and framing them according to pre-established normative values, it brings to light the norms of power that benefit from this invisibility. Here, we find an idea of critique – active and disruptive intervention in a certain economy of visibility, through an unmasking of the hidden machinery of norms that govern our conduct – that differs from the sort of notion presupposed by Habermas and does not presuppose a prescriptive stance.

Moreover, as we have seen, a description of a certain practice or institution that demonstrates the historical contingency and fragility of the norms it embodies could be seen as a way to challenge their normative force, their capacity to interpellate, to normalise and act effectively – in a word, their power. Foucault’s though would be “anti-normative” in the sense that it attacks the normalising and normative force of existing norms – here understood not in the Canguilhemian sense of creative institution of norms of life, but in the sense of their claim over our bodies and conducts. In this sense, the norm is precisely the problem: Foucault is targeting the assumptions, natural associations or coercive and disciplinary apparatuses that assure that we obey and follow a certain norm. Foucault’s approach consists in revealing the ways in which the rule rules, instead of repeating its procedures and operations by prescribing or positing other individual norms to be obeyed (which would, again, mean to establish a new rule over the practices of social agents). The critique of the current normalising norms by which we are governed does not mean simply to present other norms in relation to which a possibly similar process of normalisation would take place. In this sense, I believe commentators like Taylor would be right in defending Foucault’s critical stance by arguing that his idea of critique would be essentially non-normative and even anti-normative.999

997 “And, in order to be exercised, this power had to be given an instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible” (DP, 214).
998 EW2, 449.
999 Another illustration of this non-normative form of critique is a sort of unmasking of the gap which separates an institution’s stated aim and its actual practice: for instance, the humanisation of punishment in DP, which produces a much deeper and ingrained form of power, or the humanisation of the treatmenets applied to the mad by Tuke and Pinel, which actually open a new field of power and objectivation. As Kelly shows: “to say an institution does not serve its purported purpose is a devastating criticism in itself” (For Foucault, 149-150).
In order to understand this, we must bear in mind that, for Foucault, norms are connected to forms of government. Merely proposing other norms would be to ignore that, for Foucault, critique and critical diagnosis of the ways in which we are governed cannot be separated from a concrete history of resistance to the ‘arts of governing’: that stance against government – against being governed in this way and at that cost, which would mean to say, ‘by these norms’. In short, Foucault’s work can be considered anti-normative to the extent that it challenges the acceptance of the norms which govern us as ‘accomplished facts’ or a historical necessity. It seeks to expose the fragility of these norms, tactically undermining their power by exposing their hidden cogs and engines.

However, I would like to suggest that, after this first critical distance regarding the notions of norm and normativity (which is a productive attitude in the context of Foucault’s alleged “normative confusions”), we need to take a step further in order to understand Foucault’s proposition according to which the task of ethics today consists in the creation of ways of life. In order to do this, we need to reintroduce the notions of norm and normativity, showing how Canguilhem’s framework can be a useful tool not only for the description of a power that operates through norms, but also of the creation of ways of life defined as living by norms.

How can we articulate Foucault’s idea of critique from the perspective of this paradigm of normativity? My contention is that a fundamentally different notion of normativity (one imported from Canguilhem’s work, and therefore radically different from the one proposed by Habermas and Fraser) would help us articulating this different notion of critique. Through the lens of normativity, Foucault’s critical task of diagnosing the points of instability and the “kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom”, means mobilising a form of attention to the social space that I would call ‘clinical’.

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1000 PT, 28.
1001 EW2, 450.
1002 I follow Artières’ suggestion that one of the main intellectual and critical tasks proposed by Foucault’s work is that of diagnosis – and that one of the ways to describe this activity is the analogy with medicine (Artières go as far as to use Foucault’s descriptions of the medical and clinical practice in BC to illustrate the activity of the philosopher. See Artières, “Dizer a atualidade”, in Foucault. A coragem da verdade, ed. F. Gros. Sao Paulo: Parabola, 2004, 15-38). Foucault emphasised the ‘curative’ and ‘medical’ aspect of genealogy in his reading of Nietzsche (see FR, 80) and even stated that he was himself a ‘doctor’ in some way: “Je suis médecin, disons que je suis diagnosticien. Je veux faire un diagnostic et mon travail consiste à mettre au jour, par l’incision même de l’écriture, quelque chose qui soit la vérité de ce qui est mort” (Eribon, Michel Foucault, 260). Medicine also appears in his analyses of the care of the self as fundamentally linked to philosophy and playing an important role in the ancient practices of subjectivation (CS, 54-55). However, by highlighting this analogy, I am not suggesting that Foucault is what one could call a ‘social pathologist’. This would presuppose an
This is because the social agents themselves ‘polarly’ engage with existing norms and their effects of power. Here, an analogy with Canguilhem’s shift of perspectives in the analysis of disease can help us describing Foucault’s position. As we have seen in Canguilhem’s analysis of pathology, even the negative moment of a polarised experience of norms already constitutes a normative stance: a reaction of the living being against indifference and inertia, against the reduction of one’s life to normalised norms, or a response to suffering and the event of pain. In Canguilhem’s account, it is the patient’s own experience of suffering and negativity that delimits the space for inquiry for the physiologist and the doctor. Moreover, it is through clinical activity that this experience is perceived by the doctor and opens a new path of investigation and therapeutic action.

underlying idea of a normal society, of the healthy social state – as well as the sort of analogy between society and organism articulated by Comte and the proponents of the quantitative thesis. As we have seen in our reading of Canguilhem, one of the problems with the quantitative thesis was precisely that it treated society as an organism (when, as we have seen, norms in society operate in a way which is fundamentally different from the way it does in an individual living being), and that it treated the organism itself as a sort of harmonious whole, which would tend to order, stability, homeostasis and conservation of a pre-established normality. Canguilhem pointed to the limits of the society-organism analogy by highlighting the role of technique and plasticity in social normativity (as well as the polemic and disputed character of social norms); he also criticised the view of the organism presupposed by the quantitative thesis, which would presuppose a transcendent norm and a form of normality that would not allow for contingent configurations, innovation through the experience of sickness, mutation or crisis. Furthermore, it is important to add that a notion of ‘social pathology’ would also presuppose what we have called an ‘ideology – or philosophy – of order’ (which excluded a priori any form considered as divergent, deviant or abnormal). To speak of clinical practice of attention to the emerging forces in the social space, and to the forms of resistance, suffering and counter-power that constantly take place in it, is very different from establishing a model for the understanding of ‘social pathologies’: in this sense, my attempt is to present Foucault as a Nietzschean or a Canguilhemian thinker, attentive to the innovative and singular character of deviance, resistance, degeneration, mutation, etc. A clear example of Foucault’s resistance to this sort of model appears in a response he gives to F. Elders in 1974. The latter asks how would Foucault describe our modern societies if he had to borrow the vocabulary of (psycho-)pathology: what kind of folies would he highlight? (DE1, 1375).

Foucault explains that this sort of description is essentially conservative, ignoring the practices of power and knowledge which allow the normal and the pathological to be distinguished in society and the concrete practices of exclusion this division entails: “La definition de la maladie et de la folie, et la classification des fous, a été faite de facon à exclure de notre société un certain nombre de gens (…). Personne n’est plus conservateur que les gens qui vous disent que le monde moderne est atteint d’anxiété ou de schizophrénie. C’est en fait une maniére habile d’exclure certaines personnes ou certains schémas de comportement…” (DE1, 1375).

Two textual places clearly illustrate this claim: the first, is Foucault’s 1978 text “What is Critique?” where the history of the arts of government is accompanied by a history of the arts of not being governed (quite so much, in this way, at that cost) and counter-conducts. Here, critique appears embodied in a concrete ethos, always historical and situated (see PT). Another clear example is the primacy of resistance in “The Subject and Power”, where Foucault speaks of the concrete, historical and existing local struggles that precede a theoretical and historical work on the functioning of power (EW3, 329).

That is, as we have seen, a displacement from the perspective of the physician to the perspective of the patient.
I argue that, in Foucault, social critique operates in a similar way. Through the notion of "history of the present", Foucault connects genealogical analysis to struggles that take place ‘today’. It is through concrete struggles happening in the present that the critic discovers points of instability and certain intolerable effects of power, whose fragile history he then traces. Just like clinical practice in Canguilhem depends on the normative and polarised experience of the sick person – and to a certain extent extends it – critical activity in Foucault depends on the experience of those social agents who first suffer the effects of power. It is in this experience that genealogy finds its objects and the normative force that will drive it. If, for Canguilhem, pain and disease were considered the event of ‘physiological awe’ that gives impetus to the sciences of life and therapy; for Foucault, the experience of those who suffer and resist power effects shows a territory of exploration for genealogy: it constitutes its political and ethical ‘awe’. Differently from what Habermas thought, genealogy is not a “value free historical explanation” – in the same way that, for Canguilhem, medicine or therapy are not indifferent to the life they aim at saving. Rather, genealogy finds its normative force in the experience of power by social actors – a power against which they rebel. This is clear in Foucault’s notion of “subaltern knowledges”, which Habermas himself recognises as having a normative value in genealogy. Foucault saw in the “subaltern knowledges”, the voice and concrete experience of those social actors who first suffered the effects of power and generated a “historical knowledge of struggles”. These knowledges also provide a document of a lived polarity, a refusal of certain forms of power as negative, and a normative reaction against them. This insight also allows us to reinterpret Foucault’s claim according to which “in order to understand what power relations are about (...) we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these

1005 Social and political critique constitute only one aspect of the idea of critique in Foucault. In social critique the theme of enabling conditions encounters concrete and empirical political practices of power. However, critique understood as the inquiry regarding the conditions of possibility of knowledge and practices cannot be reduced to critique as a form of denunciation of the ‘intolerable’ aspect of these social practices, nor to the theoretical activity of providing reasons for action against oppression (through reasons based on ideas of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as ultimately Habermas and Fraser seem to have conceived it in their criticism of Foucault’s normative deficit). For the different varieties of the critical theme in Foucault, see Han-Pile, “Foucault, Normativity and Critique as Practice of the Self”.
1006 DP, 31.
1007 As Habermas says, Foucault is thinking of those experiences of groups subordinated to power” and “people who are the first to experience a technology of power with their own bodies” (The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 280). This could also be a possible way to interpret the notion of an “insurrection of subaltern knowledges” (SMD, 7).
1008 Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 275.
1009 Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 280.
relations”. Thinking resistance as a starting point for the analysis of power relations means seeing in rebellion against (and opposition to) certain forms of power the index of something that requires both historiographical exploration and concrete action.

From the same perspective, we can revisit Fraser’s interesting insight of a body-language related to expression of suffering, which would allow the genealogist to elaborate a critique starting from this suffering impressed upon the bodies of those subjected to power. In Habermas’ reading, for Fraser it is in the body of the oppressed that Foucault would find the normative grounds for critique. In this sense, Fraser’s proposition could be read from the perspective of the idea of critique as ‘clinical’ attention, but also expressing what Han-Pile called the “cultivation of an ethical sensibility”. As she explains, “the underlying idea is that the source of normativity is not a code, or a set of arguments, but the ethical sensitivity to particular situations (...). To others, we cannot offer justifications, but ‘merely’ try to make them sensitive to the normative orientation by way of examples, narratives and the like”. Indeed, this view seems to capture an essential aspect of Foucault’s genealogical procedure: through narratives (which he goes as far as to define as ‘fictions’), genealogy makes a practice or an institution appear as ‘intolerable’. Once presented through the lens of genealogical history and the experience of those who suffer the effects of power and institutions, Foucault’s question to these institutions and those who operate within them is, as he says in 1984: “Est-ce que vous êtes capables de supporter votre propre histoire?”. In this sense, genealogy is this cultivation of sensibility to (and perception of) forms of suffering and oppression – a sensitivity to the ‘intolerable’.

1010 EW3, 329.
1011 Fraser, “Foucault’s Body-Language”, 63-64. Similarly, in his analysis of Foucault’s political use of a rights-based language, Paul Patton highlights an important normative moment in Foucault’s work where he states that the suffering of individuals “grounds an absolute right to stand up and speak to those who hold power” (EW3, 475). As he explains, “the justification of such a right also depends on other moral and political principles that support the avoidance of unjustified suffering” (Patton, “Government, Rights and Legitimacy”, 230).
1012 Nancy Fraser has proposed an interpretation that (...) does explain whence the cryptonormativism of this declared value-free historiography arises”; he explains that power “preserves a literally aesthetic relation to the perception of the body, to the painful experience of the mistreated body” (Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 284-285). Habermas is interpreting Fraser’s idea of “the revulsion generated by Foucault’s graphic depiction of processes to produce ‘docile-useful bodies’” (“Foucault’s Body-Language”, 59). However, I think that the claim that Foucault grounds criticism in “rhetoric” rather than “theory” is still problematic, since it does not identify the source of normativity, which in my reading, the critic finds in existing struggles and insurgencies in the social space.
1013 Han-Pile, “Foucault, Normativity and Critique as Practice of the Self”, 80.
1014 Han-Pile, “Foucault, Normativity and Critique as Practice of the Self”, 96.
1015 EW3, 242-243
1016 DE2, 1568.
However, Fraser’s hypothesis – later taken up by Habermas – subscribes to the idea that the best way of responding to the problem of the apparent lack of normative grounds for critique in Foucault’s work is to find a hidden normative stance, which here appears as embodied suffering. Although this response is relatively effective and captures what I believe is a fundamental ethical concern for Foucault, it still uncritically presupposes – or, at least takes for granted – the ‘normativist’ notion of critique. Ultimately, assuming that Foucault’s work is cryptonormative (and trying to identify its hidden normative stances) would mean to admit that philosophy can and should propose norms and forms of life – and that Foucault would be doing that without sufficient justification. This could also entail that there is a positive set of fixed norms operating underlying and grounding genealogical analysis. Finally, this would lead us to what I think is a very problematic position: we would admit a normative stance (as defined by critical theorists) in Foucault’s work, without revising the very idea of critique which we are projecting onto Foucault’s work. This reflects the trend described by Kelly: “Foucault’s critics do not in any case seriously consider how it might be possible to engage in political criticism non-normatively, so when faced with his non normative thought, they either condemn it as incoherent or posit normative values that the see at work in his thought”. I believe that Fraser rightly identified the cultivation of a particular sensibility – of a political form of attention to the experience of social agents – while at the same time mistakenly conflating a particular normative content (allegedly a hidden normative ground) with this form of attention, with this disposition and sensibility regarding the experience of others.

Furthermore, I believe that Fraser’s hypothesis according to which bodily suffering would be the hidden normative ground of Foucault’s work is intrinsically problematic for a number of reasons. First, in the way Fraser describes this schema, the perception of this suffering would depend only on the intellectual or critic and his or her aesthetic sensibility, and it would exclude the voice of those who suffer in the diagnosis of the negative aspect of a certain social practice. This diagnosis of negative suffering could simply be done independently of them, and independently of their effort to resist it, and would later be articulate and communicated aesthetically. Moreover, suffering would look at social agents through the lens of passivity. The critic would then have to actively articulate this experience of their suffering passivity in a systematic critique. This would risk restoring the privilege of the perception of the critic in detriment of the experience of those who live the

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1017 Kelly, For Foucault, 150.
1018 Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 284-285.
effects of power as negative and rebel against these effects. In this sense, it would restore the privilege of the intellectual in identifying when a practice should be criticised, which was one of the presuppositions of the ‘normativist’ idea of critique, as if those who experience power were not already in an agonistic and active relation with it, as if their practices and counter-conducts could not already embody an active form of critical response.

Additionally, in practice, the very idea of suffering could become too vague to identify when a practice should be challenged. We could claim, with Kelly, that “if ‘suffering’ were being posited as a normative grounding, it would ground a right to an absence of any unpleasantness”. This, however, does not seem to be the case, since we could think of forms of subjective suffering that would not reflect a structural misfortune. In other words, if suffering and the avoidance of suffering is the normative ground of Foucault’s thought, how could one not suppose that his work’s aim would be that of eliminating all suffering from the world? By contrast, I believe that Foucault is a tragic thinker and that, like Nietzsche and Canguilhem, he integrates the negative into the experience of life, attributing an important – and sometimes creative – status to it. Therefore, rather than suffering tout court, one would have to ask when, under which conditions and what kind of suffering could function as a point of reference for critique. What seems to be at stake here is not the elimination of every form of suffering, but the one that is produced by normalising norms, by effects of power that are experienced as negative by the agents themselves, and against which they are already fighting. Foucault’s attention would be to form of suffering experienced as oppression by excesses of power and its effects. This attention would be a sort of conjectural skill in the sense that its correlate is the resistance and the voice of insurgent social actors.

Fraser is right to stress the sort of attention that Foucault directs to the suffering body. Indeed, Foucault is careful and exhaustive in his descriptions of the contorted, tortured body. But this is not enough for Foucault. This perspective must be complemented by a normative (here in the Canguilhemian sense) and polar experience of this power, which is to be found in concrete struggles and forms of resistance. Suffering, rebellion, and contestation would be the symptoms of a negative experience of norms, but could also be the sign of the emergence of other normative forces and voices. Foucault’s sensitivity to the negative value of a certain norm for those who suffer its effects would also presuppose sensibility and

1020 I’m grateful to Béatrice Han-Pile for pointing this out in her feedback.
attention to forms of resistance and to the emergence of new forces, to the deployments of normative activity. Suffering tells us part of the normative story, for it expresses polarity – but it is not the whole story. Attention to suffering is one of the forms of attention to the experiences, voices and struggles of the oppressed.

To recall a conclusion of our reading of Canguilhem, social norms are always in conflict, and to identify the points of confrontation of norms and different poles of normative agency also means identifying points of emergence of new norms, new forms of living, and new ways of governing oneself. Normativity, therefore, is to be found not in the thought and discourse of the intellectual, but in the movements of breaking old norms and creating new ones, which constantly take place in the social space. Rather than a prescriptive critique, Foucault proposes a form of critique which pays attention to each different focus of creation of norms, and the different polarised reactions to the norm. In this sense, rather than subscribing to a position of “anti-normativity”, I believe that in Foucault’s work one finds the cultivated attention to the insurgencies against local effects of power, on the one hand, and to the emergence of different norms, on the other: rather than anti-normativity, Foucault’s critique is situated within the framework of ‘alternnormativity’. Thus, the critic is not the one to posit norms, but the one who is critically and clinically attentive to the emergence of new norms in the social and political struggles. To any given hegemonic system of normalising norms, one can oppose the formless activity of normativity and the ‘other’ norms it constantly generates in the social space. This critical attention acquires, thus, the aspect of an ‘art of listening’ to the voices of normativity in the agonistic social space. This ‘art of listening’ would one of the aspects – or one of the specific techniques – that instantiates the cultivation of an ethical and political sensibility that constitutes critique and a critical ethos. Here, again, I believe an analogy with Canguilhem’s idea of ‘clinic’ could be fruitful.

In this context, there is another way in which Canguilhem’s shift of perspectives from the medical conception of disease to the disease of the sick person (‘maladie du malade’) helps us visualising the displacement in Foucault’s idea of critique, especially in what concerns the role of the ‘intellectual’ in relation to the practices he ‘critiques’, which I am characterising as an ‘art of listening’. My contention is that, in the same way that Canguilhem proposes a shift from the perspective of the doctor to that of the sick person in the identification of pathos and disease, Foucault proposes a shift of perspective in terms of the

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1021 Foucault discusses this concept in the context of an analysis of Plutarch and as component of the technologies of the self and the relation to truth in a 1982 lecture: “It is experience, competence, skill, and a certain way of familiarising ourselves with the demands of listening” (HS, 340).
normative source of critique. For Canguilhem, medicine depended on the experience of *pathos* – which is concrete, particular and situated – by the sick person to develop knowledge and technical action; for Foucault, the critique of power depends on the experience of social actors to identify its targets.

The cultivation of this art of listening is clear in the way Foucault defends a certain change in the economy of discourses, an inversion of the positions of speech and listening. If, in the traditional model, the critic is the one who *speaks*, providing reasons for resistance and action (or providing universal normative grounds which justify ‘why’ people should act, as in Habermas’ and Fraser’s formulation), in Foucault’s perspective, the critic must be, to a great extent, the one who *listens*, with careful attention to the voices and struggles that propose ‘other’ norms. For example, in “Truth and Power”, Foucault says: “For a long period, the ‘left’ intellectual spoke, and was acknowledged the right of speaking, in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard, as the spokesman of the universal”.¹⁰²² In Foucault’s reading, historically speaking this figure of the universal intellectual – consciousness of all – is declining, giving space to what he calls the ‘specific intellectual’.¹⁰²³ As Foucault claims, the masses do not need the intellectual.¹⁰²⁴ Indeed, as Deleuze sees it, Foucault shows the “indignité de parler pour les autres”.¹⁰²⁵ This is clear in Foucault’s practical activity with the GIP, for example, which he characterises as an attempt to “donner la parole aux détenus”,¹⁰²⁶ who have the concrete experience of the prison. This attitude of ‘breaking the silence’ and of listening attentively to the voice of the oppressed is present since the beginnings of Foucault’s work in the History of Madness, where one of the main attempts was to break the monopoly of psychiatric discourse over madness, and to find the voice of the mad through an ‘archaeology of silence’.¹⁰²⁷ Even if it represents the process of silencing negatively – instead of focusing on a positive emergence of ‘alternormativity’ through the voice of the other – this ‘archaeology’ is nevertheless critical to the extent that it seeks to listen to the voice of the voiceless, to find the language of those who have been banished from language.

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¹⁰²² EW3, 126.
¹⁰²³ EW3, 131.
¹⁰²⁴ DE1, 1176.
¹⁰²⁵ DE1, 1177.
¹⁰²⁶ D1, 1072.
¹⁰²⁷ See HM’s 1961 preface. The emphasis on silencing, however, must be carefully considered here, since it could initially point to a repressive notion of power. Through the notion of ‘alternormativity’ I suggest focusing on the creative emergence of new norms in the social space, rather than on repressed voices, seen in the framework of negative power.
In “Useless to Revolt?”, a 1979 critical text discussing his support to the Iranian Revolution in its beginnings, Foucault formulates very clearly his ethical concern with the voice of the other within the framework of what I called a political ‘art of listening’. According to Foucault, the intellectual (or the critic) should be attentive and affirm the forms of transgressive singularities that emerge in history, challenging forms of power and government – and history itself.\textsuperscript{1028} For him, independently of the reasons that the intellectual may give, people do revolt. Foucault claims that the emergence of these voices of the oppressed in history, their revolt, should be heard:

No one is obliged to find that these confused voices sing better than the others and speak the truth itself. It is enough that they exist and that they have against them everything that is dead set on shutting them up for there to be a sense in listening to them and in seeing what they mean to say.\textsuperscript{1029}

In this context, Foucault explains that his theoretical ethic consists in being “respectful when a singularity revolts”.\textsuperscript{1030} This almost unconditional defence of subversive singularity seems to be connected to the idea I have been stressing regarding the unlocking of normative activity: the emergence of those singularities are events that challenge history and power by trespassing them with difference, with the possibility of living differently, or, in a word, with an ‘alternormativity’. From this perspective, when singularities ‘break the silence’, we see not only a refusal of what is, but also the emergence, an inauguration and a new beginning.\textsuperscript{1031}

\textsuperscript{1028} “Revolts belong to history. But, in a certain sense, they escape from it. The impulse by which a single individual, a group, a minority, or an entire people says, ‘I will no longer obey’, and throws the risk of their entire life in the face of an authority they consider unjust seem to me something irreducible” (EW3, 449).
\textsuperscript{1029} EW3, 452.
\textsuperscript{1030} EW3, 453.
\textsuperscript{1031} The reader could perhaps object that although the ‘alternormativity’ insight removes critique from its legislative and prescriptive position, it nevertheless still preserves a sort of minimalistic normative ground for criticism in the Habermasian sense: the defence of a content-empty structure, the defence of normative activity against normalising norms. In this sense, this cunning reader could state that not having specific positive and fixed norms is already a norm or functions as a norm. Perhaps that is right; however, in this sense, this norm would prevent the critic from providing any particular norm whatsoever to the social actors who find themselves confronting power; this would be a normless form of normativity, which preserves only that which according to Canguilhem is normative in the primary sense: the agency that establishes norms, and it tries to bring this activity into the philosophical edifice. Even though I would contend that this objection would restore the very idea of critique as the activity of providing normative grounds, and therefore of comparing fact to norm – which I believe Foucault discarded, I would at least be more sympathetic to this sort of minimalistic notion of norm as an empty structure which allows for the activity that creates norms to assert itself. In this sense I would agree with Kelly when he writes that “Foucault’s only normative stance (…) was to refuse any kind of static conception of the human that could ground normativity” (\textit{For Foucault}, 166).
In texts like “Friendship as a Way of Life” and “Useless to Revolt?”, Foucault positions himself as someone who listens to the voices that emerge in the social space. This process of listening unfolds into two different set of tasks. The first is historical and theoretical: the historical work on the institutions against which they revolt, which they denounce or against which they fight. The ‘awe’ found in existing practices of resistance and struggle is deepened by the introduction of a historical and theoretical level, which seeks to reconstruct the process by which certain norms were established and came to be accepted. The voices of those who resisted the effects of power, those who experienced them negatively, opened a path of investigation, by making certain forms and effects of power visible; the genealogist will further this process of ‘making power visible’. The second is a political task that unfolds into militant activity, which respects the voice of revolts and struggles, supporting them and providing them with platforms – or the act of ‘donner la parole’ as Foucault phrased it in the context of the GIP –, amplifying their critical impetus without prescribing them a path, without any guarantee of how they will develop, of what new forms and norms they will constitute in their affirmation.

Through the practice of this ‘art of listening’ to insurgent voices, Foucault identifies a normative focus: a deployment of normative activity, both in in practices that refuse power (there he notes a polarised activity, a response to effects of power and norms which are experienced as negative) and in those that inaugurate other norms. The work of the intellectual is not to “form the political will of others”. The normative source of critique is not to be found in philosophy, but in the demands and dynamics of the struggles. However, by allying himself through an active process of listening to those marginalised, minor, oppressed voices when they emerge and make claims against power, he can “participate in the formation of a [new] political will”.

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1032 DE2, 1495.
1033 DE2, 1495.
Conclusion

This thesis constitutes an attempt to produce a philosophical encounter between Foucault and Canguilhem. Starting with a reflection regarding the place of the notion of life in Foucault’s thought, my effort was to establish a reading of his work based on the continuity that can be found in his problematisation of life. However, when analysing the different concepts of life articulated in Foucault’s philosophical histories, and despite the continuity of an enquiry on the modes of politicisation of life, we found a space of ambiguity and discontinuity. In order to connect these different problematisations of life in Foucault’s work I have proposed to read it through the lens of Canguilhem’s notion of life.

Following the discrete but consistent references to Canguilhem in Foucault’s work, I proposed to look for a philosophical framework in Canguilhem’s medicine thesis, where we found a philosophy of life, norms and normativity. In order to think of forms of exchange and interaction between the two authors, I proposed to reconnect Canguilhem’s work on the history of medicine and the life sciences to his early philosophical and political writings, proposing a new image of this thinker – and his importance to Foucault – beyond the history of science and historical epistemology. The image that emerges from our analysis is that of a philosophe resistant. In our exploration of Canguilhem’s intellectual trajectory prior to the Normal and the Pathological, we found a philosophy of resistance and rebellion against the accomplished fact and the contingent historical choices that define what we are, which profoundly resonates with Foucault’s critical work.

Through the notion of vital normativity, Canguilhem revealed the evaluations, the creations of norms and ways of being that characterise every form of life, constituting a politics of the living. For Canguilhem, there is no normless or formless life: all life is already organised and informed in a certain way. In vital normativity, he found the principle of a philosophy of resistance, of a life that resists death, while facing its own precarity. Life is, for Canguilhem, a partisan activity which, against inertia and indifference, must break and create norms to go on living. Both Canguilhem and Foucault conceived the living being as a political reality; both ‘naturalised’ politics, grounding it on the polemical and political processes of life. Life, however, cannot be separated from social and political processes, as well as of the collective techniques, that shape it in history. Life becomes a political process, and politics a vital process, in a fully transitive and immanent relation.
In the *Normal and the Pathological*, I have found a framework that allowed me to clarify Foucault's conception of the norm from a different angle. Canguilhem's notion of life provided a key to read Foucault's work on power and its functioning as norm, as well as the philosophical grounds to propose a reading based on a normative force within life that is distinct from (and yet related to) the kind of normalisation that characterises biopolitics. In this sense, the main conceptual device I sought to apply to Foucault's work was based on the distinction between two ways of functioning of the norm and of our relation to it: 'normativity' (the creation of and experimentation with norms) and 'normalisation' (reduction to pre-established norms).

In this sense, I showed that although life is spoken of in many ways and, all of them refer to norms – to the norms that constitute different forms of life, different forms of subjectivity and different forms of government. Given the historical distance and the different conceptual morphology of life in Foucault's works of the 1970s and the 1980s, I posed the problem of the *homonymy* of the notion of life, understood as the biological, organic and politicised material of biopower, on the one hand, and the notion of *bios*, of a life which is the correlate of a technique of transformation and self-government. Through Canguilhem's framework, however, we were able to relate every life to norms that inform it: both the modern biopolitical life and the ancient *bios* were defined by a certain organisation of norms, a certain form of life; both were, in different ways, related to a technique that acts upon it and shapes it. Thus, the ambiguity of the notion of life, which initially appeared to us under the form of *homonymy*, took up the form of a polysemic *equivocity*: a life that is as plural as its possible norms. In this context, to speak about life, means to refer to different constellations of norms, different forms of life, which have a specific history and a geography.

However, both for Foucault and Canguilhem, there are two major ways in which life's relation to norms is structured: a normalised or normalising relation, on the one hand, and a normative one, on the other. In order to situate these two configurations in Foucault, I proposed to analyse them through the notions of norm, government and subjectivity. In normalisation, norms appear as principles of correction and coercion, such as the disciplines, configured as schemes of response and performances related to effects of docility. Government, in its turn appears as techniques of power over individual living bodies and populations. Finally, the subject is configured through practices of *assujettissement*. In the constellation of normativity, however, these same categories acquire a different structure. The norm is defined as a part of a voluntary and active process of engagement with the world, with others and with oneself, a process of creation of certain dispositions and ways
of being; government appears as self-government, as careful and critical action upon one’s own schemes of action. Finally, subjectivity appears as subjectivation, which, in our discussion of the arts of living and biotechniques, took up the form of a relation to norms of life based on a pragmatics of the self, focused on the transformation of oneself.

This framework also has an impact in the way we think Foucault’s political gestures and critical ethos. The first idea that can be mobilised in this context, responding to criticisms that see in Foucault’s work a normative deficit (or an anti-normative stance), is that of ‘alternormativity’. Through this idea, I mobilised Canguilhem’s notion of normativity to present Foucault’s critical work first of all as a defence of the normativity capacity, the experimentation of different norms and different ways of life that emerge in the political space, against normalisation and the fixation in norms that are experienced as negative and oppressive by social agents. Through Canguilhem’s idea of the social norm, I believe it becomes clear that whenever there is a particular, contingent norm, one can mobilise another one against it: no agent or group can hold the monopoly of normativity, the capacity to inaugurate norms. In the agonistics of the social space, there are always different points in which norms are being refused and other norms are being proposed. It is Foucault’s clinical and critical attention to the emergence of these other norms in concrete social struggles that I have called ‘alternormativity’.

This particular form of attention to the insurgent movements and voices in the conflicts around the relations of power that take place in the social space can be defined as a political ‘art of listening’. The theme of an art of listening could be related to what Han-Pile called the “cultivation of an ethical sensitivity”, and it is rooted in Foucault analysis of the ancient technologies of the self – especially in Plutarch, for whom the techniques of listening were part of a practice of the care of the self and others. In that context, the art of listening appears as a relation to truth which is connected to forms of subjectivation of truth, as well as a correlate of parrhesia. Additionally, ‘listening’ [écoute] plays an important role in Canguilhem’s reflection on clinic and therapy. As Le Blanc argued, medicine is, for Canguilhem, a form of listening to the sick living being: “écoute du vivant malade qui introduit une differentiation du normal et du pathologique”. I believe that these elements can be mobilised to reinterpret Foucault’s critical ethos. Foucault’s political art of listening, I argued, presupposes the experience of social agents exposed to the effects of power and resisting these effects through counter-conducts, minor and subaltern knowledges and

1034 Le Blanc, Canguilhem et les normes, 31.
memories of the struggles. In “Useless to Revolt?”, Foucault saw a refusal to submit that exceeded life itself. Canguilhem’s analysis of disease was particularly useful to articulate this art of listening: in the same way the doctor explores and addresses the ‘vital awe’ caused by the pain of the sick person, so the critic experiences the voice of those who rise against power and normalising norms as a sort of ethical and political ‘awe’. As in the experience of illness by the sick person, the resistance of social agents to the effects of power introduced a negative value and a polarised experience of norms. In both cases, a positive norm can only emerge from this negative movement of evaluation. It is in this sense that the ‘art of listening’ I refer to is related to the notion of ‘alternormativity’: the active listener knows that with every voice that emerges against certain effects of power, emerges also a new possible focus of normativity.

To conclude, Foucault’s genealogy presupposes and experimental and erratic attitude, because it does not presuppose any positive content. Its emptiness in terms of the content of the norms of life is the correlate of his emphasis on the variability of forms. Critique must cultivate this empty space in order not to become a program, that is, in order not to replace the indefinite task of imagination by any given norm. In the same way that, in his early work on Binswanger, Foucault opposed the dynamic process of imagination to any sedimented image, I believe we can oppose the dynamic activity of normativity to any crystallised norm.1035

The critical aspect of Foucault’s genealogy consists exactly in its transformative and differential aspect – finding fissures in the illness of our normalised practices, in the norms of power, challenging the necessity of these norms, not in order to revive specific norms of life, but rather reactivating our normative capacity to create different contingent ways of life, in a permanent, endless errancy.

1035 DE1, 146.
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