

From the Vital to the Social

Canguilhem and Foucault—Reflections on Vital and Social Norms

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IN HIS “NEW REFLECTIONS ON THE NORMAL AND THE PATHOLOGICAL,” published “twenty years later” as a supplement to the *Essay on Some Problems concerning the Normal and the Pathological* from 1943, Georges Canguilhem, against the background of his investigations into the concept of life and the vital norm, examines the constitution of social norms. Canguilhem, who here also adopts the works of Michel Foucault—especially *The Birth of the Clinic*—insists, however, that he is inquiring into social norms purely for the sake of a better understanding of the organism: “It is with the organism in view that I am allowing myself some forays into society.”¹

In what follows—starting from this observation yet diverging from Canguilhem—I pursue the question concerning the vital for the sake of a better understanding of *society*, of the social. My thesis is that it is precisely the necessary intertwining, synthesis, or, rather, amalgamation of the social and vital norms that sheds light on the nature of the social. Accordingly, at the center of the analysis is primarily Canguilhem’s understanding of social norms and their problematic, internal, and changing relation to vital norms. In his *Essay* as well as in his essay collection *Knowledge of Life*, Canguilhem investigates the norm under the sign of normativity in terms of its inner dynamic and with regard to the living in general. There Canguilhem’s explicit plan is to investigate the vital norm in isolation from social influences as a phenomenon of the living, since any

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¹ Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 235. “New Reflections on the Normal and the Pathological” appears as section 2 in *The Normal and the Pathological*.



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social influence would necessarily distort the “medical experiment” and its object, namely, life. This position is reformulated in “New Reflections” to the effect that the social phenomena are now no longer subordinate to the vital and the vital norms; instead, social phenomena break up into two independent regimes, two “*allures*” (gaits or affectations of life), the social and the vital, which Canguilhem characterizes as incommensurable. The relation between these two regimes is consequently no longer hierarchical, whereby the social is conceived as merely subordinate to the vital; rather, now it is characterized by Canguilhem as a *mimetic* relation. The double implication of this thesis—for the concept of life, on the one hand, and the question concerning social norms, on the other—will be investigated in this essay. My conjecture is that it is precisely Canguilhem’s talk of the imitation, or *mimesis*, of the vital through the social that provides a decisive impulse for Foucault’s full formulation of biopolitics, of governmentality as a power or control over the life of the population.

THE POLARITY OF THE LIVING

The *Essay on Some Problems concerning the Normal and the Pathological*, which Canguilhem submitted as his doctoral thesis in medicine in 1943, sets itself the task of inquiring into the boundaries between normal and pathological phenomena, as well as the implications of these boundaries for the concept of life. The reflection on disease or health as a “silence of the organs” (René Leriche) is carried out here not with regard to medicine or biology but rather *in opposition* to these with a view to the standpoint of the sick person, who, in contrast to the traditional medical understanding, is understood by Canguilhem as *non-neutral*. Following a refutation of the positivist understanding, according to which pathological phenomena are solely quantitative variations of normal phenomena, the investigation of the originality of the pathological and the individual experience of disease is carried out through the sick person in the *clinic* (and not in physiology as science). While the first part of the *Essay* exposes and criticizes the neglect of the biological *individual* in the homogenization of the normal and the pathological as a result of the scientific norm, the second part, “Do Sciences of the Normal and Pathological Exist?,” is concerned with the formation of organic individuality through disease and the experience of it. For it is disease that makes the living into the living and at the same time “reveals” the aspiration of each biological individual to remain alive and become stronger.

Canguilhem adopts this “teaching” (as does Foucault later with his talk of “mortalism” in *The Birth of the Clinic*) from Xavier Bichat, who in his *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* from 1800 had characterized life as “the totality of those functions which resist death.”² Thereby the negative dimension of death is inscribed into life in such a way that a “classical” scientization and the accompanying negation of its specific dynamic no longer seem supportable. Canguilhem counters scientific medicine or physiology with a knowledge of life, which is always also a living knowledge, in which knowledge and life reciprocally penetrate one another: “Intelligence can apply itself to life only if it recognizes the originality of life. The thought of the living must take from the living the idea of the living.”³

Canguilhem captures the originality of life in normative concepts, which lead him to the determination of a specific “normativity” of life. Life is normative when it *calls into question* the established norms and creates new ones, that is, when it pursues a creative impulse. This means

² Xavier Bichat, *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), 57.

³ Georges Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), xx.

that the living brings forth its vital values, its norms, and its own milieu—and at the same time brings forth itself in and by means of these. Thus, Canguilhem shows in “The Living and Its Milieu” the extent to which life is precisely *not* thrown into an existing (physical) milieu to which it would subsequently be subjected, in the way that animistic explanations of life supposed:⁴ “to study a living being in experimentally constructed conditions is to make a milieu for it, to impose a milieu on it; yet it is characteristic of the living that *it makes its milieu for itself, that it composes its milieu.*”⁵

Following Jakob von Uexküll and Kurt Goldstein, Canguilhem here neglects the difference between human and animal life with regard to the investigation of the living in general, for *every* animal—paradigmatically Uexküll’s tick—behaves, with regard to the construction of its milieu, in the vital sense normatively, insofar as it is capable of “preferring” certain (beneficial) elements in its environment and “excluding” others (that are threatening or merely toward which it is indifferent):

But we repeat that biological functions are unintelligible as observation reveals them to us, if they express only states of a material which is passive before changes in the environment. In fact the environment of the living being is also the work of the living being who chooses to shield himself from or submit himself to certain influences. We can say of the universe of every living thing what Reininger says of the universe of man: “Unser Weltbild ist immer zugleich ein Wertbild,” our image of the world is always a display of values as well.⁶

Life as vital normativity is exposing and evading, or in Canguilhem’s words: “Even for an amoeba, living means preference and exclusion.”⁷ The living searches out those stimuli in its environment that prove advantageous to it and likewise avoids those other stimuli, threats, or limits that would restrict its life:

The animal finds it simpler to do what it privileges. It has its own vital norms. The relation between the living and the milieu establishes itself as a debate (*Auseinandersetzung*), to which the living brings its own proper norms of appreciating situations, both dominating the milieu and accommodating itself to it.⁸

THE DOUBLE LIFE

Life is thus described as the activity of differentiation, which here takes on a double meaning: namely, of preservation (by means of regulation) *and* of production or creation (*création*), also described as individualization. In this sense, normativity designates primarily the inner

⁴ Monica Greco reminds us that Canguilhem’s originality of life must be understood as a *logical* priority of life prior to knowledge of life, meaning prior to science. Thus, Canguilhem writes: “Once one recognizes the originality of life, one must ‘comprehend’ matter within life, and the science of matter—which is science itself—within the activity of the living” (ibid., 70). This means that the standpoint of life can make no *exception* with regard to the physicalistic milieu, in the way that animistic, classical, or naturalistic vitalism supposes, but is rather prior to this milieu. See Monica Greco, “On the Vitality of Vitalism,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 22, no. 1 (2005): 19.

⁵ Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, 111, my italics.

⁶ Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 178–79; the quotation from Robert Reininger is from his *Wertphilosophie und Ethik* (Vienna-Leipzig: Braumtiller, 1939), 29.

⁷ Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 136.

⁸ Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, 113.

autonomy of the organism, that is, the homeostatic equilibrium of the organic constants.⁹ Such an understanding of vital normativity as the maintenance of equilibrium in the *milieu intérieur* likewise presupposes a holistic understanding of the organism, which Canguilhem adopts from Goldstein.¹⁰ The organism is thought of here in reference to the global activity of regulation that accompanies precisely the possibility of the maintenance of the inner, organic equilibrium. For the maintenance of this equilibrium, the organism must exclude all those factors that could compromise the functional value that, Canguilhem writes, “is contained as a norm in the structure itself”; it does this through regulation, which counts as a “biological fact par excellence.”¹¹

At the same time, it seems as though this form of regulation finds itself in dangerous proximity to the pathological state of life, which Canguilhem describes, again with Goldstein, not merely as a life that is governed from outside through the milieu; rather, he goes further and states that the life “that affirms itself against the milieu is a life already threatened”¹² and thus is a *reactive* life, and regulation is hence the answer to the danger of an external determination of life. In contrast, for Canguilhem, normativity designates, in a *second sense*—which I would like to call genuinely vital—the consummate priority of the living prior to its milieu, that is, its consummate autonomy in the face of external constraints. In this second sense, the normativity of life is a creative or originating process, a dynamic that characterizes the event of individualization or, rather, production of individuality within the living (and again everything living, not just human): “Every living being individualizes itself through the values that it actualizes.”¹³

The living evaluates and devaluates and thus makes for itself new, vital values, which allow its specific dynamic to unfold. This consists in “risking” the achieved norms or values and putting them on the line again and again, since otherwise the living immobilizes itself in an artificial equilibrium of the functions of the organs. In such a state of equilibrium (produced artificially, for example, in the laboratory), life loses its ability (or power) to break its old norms and to

⁹ Life is, according to Canguilhem’s paraphrasing of Walter Cannon, “an order of precarious and threatened functions which are constantly reestablished by a system of regulations” (Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 260).

¹⁰ While Canguilhem adopts from Goldstein’s *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man* (New York: Zone Books, 1995) the concept of organic regulation, in the determination of a creative life force, he goes beyond Goldstein’s biological understanding. Organic norms are determined through both the regulation of their inner equilibrium and the maintenance of a balanced relation between life and the environment (“*normes de centration*”). Here Canguilhem follows Goldstein’s theses. With regard to the creation of norms, however, he distances himself from them, for Goldstein conceives of this creation exclusively within a homeostatic whole, that is, within an organic structure that, as a whole, is subordinate to the laws maintaining the constant. The organic norm is the postulating of such an organic constant, which at the same time provides the structure of organic behavior (self-preservation). Canguilhem’s understanding of the norm surpasses this position, insofar as for him the creation of norms cannot be subject to the rule of maintaining the constant but instead finds itself in a productive and permanent confrontation with the latter. This is the second sense that normativity acquires in Canguilhem’s thought and will be explained in the subsequent paragraph.

¹¹ Georges Canguilhem, “Régulation,” in *Encyclopædia universalis* (Paris: Edition Encyclopædia Universalis, 1989), 712.

¹² Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, 113.

¹³ Guillaume Le Blanc, *Canguilhem et les normes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 55. At the same time the living subjectifies itself—and with this a social dimension is introduced, but one that places the living dynamic before itself, revealing no specific differences in relation to it—in the *consciousness* of the individualization.

permanently create for itself new norms and a new milieu. The fixed, nondynamic life loses the luxury of being able to become sick, since it can no longer behave normatively toward its sickness.

Consequently, vital normativity is precisely *not* thought of by Canguilhem as adaptation; it is not similar to a homeostatic system that can integrate deviations and compensate for them in order to reach a normal standard. Instead, vital normativity is a permanent transgressing and questioning of what is given: a living organism behaves normatively when it does *not adapt* to an established milieu or norm (if it adapted, it would be *pathological*) but instead creates for itself its own milieu and its own norms. Canguilhem's normative concept of life develops in the polarity between these two dimensions, which are inseparably tied to one another, for only in its deviation from the norm can life be normative, that is, produce new norms that are for their part directed toward a new, provisional normality. Normativity consists in "breaking norms" (*faire craquer les normes*).¹⁴ Only against the background of such a creative power is an inner, yet ever precarious equilibrium possible: normality is based on normativity. In this sense Canguilhem attributes a "propulsive value" (*valeur propulsive*) to the physiological constants, which allow the living to behave normatively in the sense mentioned. By contrast, the pathological state testifies to "the precariousness of the normal established by disease. Pathological constants have a repulsive and strictly conservative value."¹⁵

Thus, the challenge of Canguilhem's concept of life is that organic normality sees itself permanently subjected to normative deviations; that is, life does *not* abide in a state of equilibrium but instead again and again puts this state to the test and goes beyond it. Alternatively, if life were merely "organism," it would be—speaking with Canguilhem—pathological; but instead it is polarity and thereby at once organic and creative.

FROM THE SOCIAL TO THE VITAL

Such an understanding of the living, however—one could polemically object—in its radical lack of hierarchy absolutizes the question of the vital norm under consideration in the *Essay* and blinds itself to the question concerning the constitution of the social norm, insofar as the social is merely a different dimension of life, yet subordinate to the living dynamic. A specific investigation of the social norm is just as difficult to undertake as a specific investigation of human life. The fact that Canguilhem himself perceives this as a desideratum is attested to by the extension of his reflection on the social norm in "New Reflections," which may be traced back both to Foucault's investigations into the norms of the "clinic" and to the confrontation with the knowledge of modern biology, which set against the "dynamic" of life a "logic" of life.

At the same time, Canguilhem, as already indicated, insists at the beginning of "New Reflections" that the aim of his laborious comparison is "to clarify the specific meaning of vital norms by comparing them with social norms."¹⁶ Canguilhem thus remains explicitly within an analysis of the vital norms, which are now to be sharpened against the background of an analysis of social norms. This explicitly vital perspective is further responsible for the fact that Canguilhem deals with social phenomena exclusively under the concept of normalization—and

¹⁴ "If we can speak of normal man as determined by the physiologist, it is because normative men exist for whom it is normal to break norms and establish new ones" (Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 164–65).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁶ Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 235.

not under the concept of normativity—highlighting that the social has *no* share in a genuinely normative (i.e., creative) dynamic:

Just as a normal school is a school [école normale] where teaching is taught, that is, where pedagogical methods are set up experimentally, so a normal medicine dropper is one which is calibrated to divide one gram of distilled water into twenty free-flowing drops so that the pharmaco-dynamic power of a substance in solution can be graduated according to a medical prescription.¹⁷

Even the standardized spacing of the European railway tracks is designated as normal gauge. Whereas “the normal” appears in all these phenomena as the result of a decision or requirement that is external to the phenomenon itself, another example that Canguilhem offers—the determination of the normal weight of a human in direct correlation with his longevity and thus as a species-specific element—deviates from this relation and *renormalizes* the normalization. Here, according to Canguilhem, the normal springs from the phenomenon itself—it answers a demand of the human for a long life. In this sense and upon closer inspection, the examples of “the normalization of the technical means of education, health, transportation for people and goods” express “collective demands,”¹⁸ which means that a society striving toward its own well-being, the best possible overall condition, finds expression in these demands.

An essential feature of normality, which Canguilhem here investigates with the aid of “the most artificial normalization, technological normalization,”¹⁹ is thus to produce a relation or, rather, a co-relativity among norms within a system. The question remains, however, of how exactly this connection, thus ultimately the production of a whole or a collective, is to be understood. In this regard the difference between social and vital norms may be summarized succinctly in the following way: whereas vital norms, in their interplay, build an (organic) *totality*—the parts of which are immanently tuned to one another, its rules operating without intention and calculation—the coherence of the social norm, in contrast, forms a *dispositif* or *diagram*.²⁰ Canguilhem himself captures this contrast with the help of the terminological juxtaposition of (social) organization and the (vital) organism. In a social organization, the norms or rules according to which the parts (i.e., the participants in the society, the social partners) join together in a whole that is aware of its own determination are *external* to the social whole and must therefore be “represented, learned, remembered, applied.”²¹ The social is a *problematic* whole. By contrast, “the order of life is made of a set of rules lived without problems,”²² for the norms of the living organism are immanent to the organism; they do not need to be applied or depicted but are instead active on their own accord—in a vital order there is therefore no break between the rule and the regulation. In this way the difference consists, not in the homeostatic mode of operation of the systems, whether they are alive or social, but rather in the position and the origin of the norms in reference to the whole that is regulated by them.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

²⁰ See Le Blanc, *Canguilhem et les normes*, 86.

²¹ Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 250.

²² *Ibid.*

Social norms, which Canguilhem investigates in light of examples of linguistic, industrial, and hygienic norms, which are guided by an interest in the well-being of society, are thus *stipulated*—that is, this stipulation depends on social, political, and economic interests and conditions. It is precisely this fact that for Canguilhem distinguishes social from vital norms: in the case of the vital, that which is regulated through the norm—living processes and organisms—relates to the norm *on its own*; by contrast, in the realm of the social, the object of the norm must first of all be brought under the norm or, rather, related to it, even when we are here dealing with altogether “consensus-conducive” questions concerning general welfare. The fact that the social norm, in contrast to the vital, is *never* lived without a problem rests on the fact that the organization of social norms only *appears* to produce a synergy.

To overcome this appearance and establish the relation between the social and the vital, which are two *incommensurable* regimes or “gaits” (*allures*) of life, Canguilhem places—in various passages in his texts—the social and vital norms in a *mimetic* relation. He thereby provides, according to this thesis, a cue for Foucault’s formulation of biopolitical, or rather governmental, practices, which not only relate to life as its object but at the same time emulate its inner dynamic.

THE MIMESIS OF THE VITAL BY THE SOCIAL

Thus, according to Canguilhem, the social order must be described as a kind of synthesis or ratio insofar as it takes part, *on the one hand*, in the organic order: it is the “invention of organs”²³ insofar as it strives to anchor the interplay of its norms in a homeostatic, self-regulating order. At the same time, however, it takes part, *on the other hand*, in the mechanical order: although its norms are organically tuned to one another, the goal or direction of its regulating activity is nonetheless not produced from within the social order itself as an answer to an immanent need; rather, “the entire social organism . . . is regulated from without and above.”²⁴ In this sense, Canguilhem concludes: “We shall say otherwise . . . namely that a society is both machine and organism.”²⁵

Canguilhem investigates this synthesis of mechanical and organic determinations by means of the model of imitation, or *mimesis*, of the vital by the social. He formulates this insight as a tendency of social regulation, of *emulating* the model of organic regulation, whereby the interplay of the elements of social regulation is described as mechanistic: “Social regulation tends toward organic regulation and *mimics it* without ceasing for all that to be composed mechanically.”²⁶ In another passage he writes, in the same spirit: “The phenomena of social organization are like a mimicry of vital organization in the sense that Aristotle says that art imitates nature. Here to imitate does not mean to copy but to tend to rediscover the sense of a production.”²⁷

The mode of operation of social phenomena may thus be understood as the emulation of vital organization. But social organization does not merely *copy* the vital; rather, it *retrieves* the vital, specifically in that sense that presupposes an understanding of vital organization and thus allows its mimesis within the scope of social possibilities. In this way, neither is the difference between the natural and the artificial superseded nor is the fact forgotten that social organizations do not cultivate and keep on cultivating themselves immanently on their own, in the way

²³ *Ibid.*, 253.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 255, my italics.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 253.

that organisms do, owing to their natural causalities. For Canguilhem, “society is a poorly unified set of means, precisely lacking an end with which the collective activity permitted by the structure would identify.”²⁸ Society lacks an inner normativity; it has no immanent norm that could steer its efforts in a single direction and at the same time make them immediately comprehensible and recognizable. And nonetheless the social norms tend to absorb the organic dynamic of the vital norms, to imitate that dynamic, and to dispose of it in the artificiality of the social context. The social forms of government indeed never lose their mechanical character, since they always remain external to the phenomenon that is to be governed, but they operate at the same time according to an as-if logic, indeed *as if they were* vital norms, insofar as they aim at the maintenance of homeostatic population conditions.

The question remains open, however, concerning the extent to which this homeostatic-organic aspect, which Canguilhem pushes to the foreground in his texts on the social norm (and which was formerly classified as the pathological), is reconcilable with a genuinely vital dimension. In other words, the question is whether the double concept of life, which Canguilhem develops as both a self-preserving and a self-transcending dynamic, is in fact rejected in this theoretical turn, as many commentators and readers of Canguilhem claim, or if instead a social *normativity* becomes conceivable that would not reduce the social solely to normalization. That would mean introducing (again) a third dimension into the investigation of the social norm or the social life, according to which social life has a share in the creative process of norms. Canguilhem himself does this indirectly, insofar as he emphasizes that, regardless of whether the “normal,” determined by the norm, emanates from an inner dynamic or an external positing, its distinctiveness consists in the fact that it itself can serve in turn as the point of reference or the “ideal” for those phenomena that are not, or not yet, normal: “The normal is then at once the extension and the exhibition of the norm.”²⁹ The normal, regardless of its origin, accordingly develops its own dynamic, by functioning as the ideal for the abnormal: the norm obtains its sense (or force) in the confrontation with that which (still) eludes it. Pierre Macherey speaks in this context of an analogy of the modes of operation of vital and social norms, which see respectively in those phenomena or states, which elude the norms themselves, their normative demand.³⁰ Against this background “the normal,” according to Canguilhem’s famous conclusion, “is not a static or peaceful, but a dynamic and polemical concept.”³¹

Accordingly, for Canguilhem a norm is “a possible mode of unifying diversity, resolving a difference, settling a disagreement,”³² and it distinguishes itself from a law of nature insofar as it has no *necessary* but rather exclusively a *possible* effect: a possible effect that can be countered or balanced by other possible effects. Thereby the dynamic, or the productive aspect, of the social norm, analogous to vital normativity, would be justified in that it can produce deviations to the established norms and counter these norms with other norms. Or rather: in the production of normativity, a new individualizing process, which creates other social norms, may be determined.

In this sense one can infer that the social corresponds to a new form of life that is not subordinate to the vital life but instead pursues the same normativity, which produces new norms and

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

³⁰ See Pierre Macherey, “Normes vitales et normes sociales,” in *Actualité de Georges Canguilhem*, ed. François Bing, Jean-François Braunstein, and Elisabeth Roudinesco (Paris: Synthélabo, 1998), 71–84.

³¹ Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 239.

³² *Ibid.*, 240.

values through deviations. The social system, Canguilhem writes, insofar as it is organized and held together not through laws of nature but precisely through norms, leaves open possibilities to create new norms and intervene in the social *dispositif*. Thus, normalization indeed produces a normality in the sense of a homeostatic rationalization, but at the same time it *also* opens a normative perspective in the possibility of creating deviating (social) norms, similar to the way the living do in their milieus.

CANGUILHEM'S VITALISM

In summary, one can thus say that the turn from the vital to the social in Canguilhem's thought has as a consequence that the concept of life, which was formerly clearly demarcated, loses its unambiguity and turns into a mixture of organic and mechanical determinations, whose interpenetration may be formulated with help from the concept of technology. From this it also follows that the question concerning the creative dynamic of life may likewise be raised concerning social life, insofar as the latter is not simply to be reduced to processes of normalization (or standardization) but rather also encompasses genuinely normative (meaning norm-creating) dynamics.

What is also in question, then, in this transition in the 1960s is the much discussed vitalism of Canguilhem. Thus, for example, Elisabeth Roudinesco *dismisses* Canguilhem's vitalism in this theoretical "turn" of the 1960s, that is, in the transition from a vitalistic understanding of a norm, which "comes from out of life," to the postvitalistic understanding of the social norm that differentiates itself in the conscious confrontation with its origin in the negation.³³ This seems too simple, however, insofar as the "juvenile" vitalism of Canguilhem in question in such a reading is generally understood as being beyond any negativity, as the pure affirmation of a life principle. Already between 1946 and 1947 Canguilhem faced this supposition in his text "Aspects of Vitalism," where he breaks with the classical vitalism of a life principle, yet at the same time accedes, with the formulation of the "permanent oscillation of life," to a reformulated vitalism.³⁴

This vitalism, which is for Canguilhem "more a morality than a theory," is "a permanent exigency of life in the living"³⁵ that distinguishes itself from animistic or naturalistic determinations of life, which Canguilhem rejects as metaphysical. At the same time—as Monica Greco reminds us in her discussion of Canguilhem's vitalism—Canguilhem does *not* reject the ontological perspective of life, which vitalism advocates. Greco instead distinguishes between two understandings of vitalism in Canguilhem's thought. First, she distinguishes an epistemological approach, which Foucault captured, following Canguilhem, with the catchphrase of "the theoretical" and "critical indicator,"³⁶ and with which Greco here describes the recurrence of vitalism "as a symptom of the specificity of life."³⁷ Second, next to this epistemological positioning, Canguilhem's vitalism also refers to the question of the ontology of life—a paradoxical ontology, which Greco understands as an ontology of contingency, "of what is permanently suspended between being and non-being,"³⁸ and which leads Foucault to the description of Canguilhem's thought as a "phi-

³³ See Elisabeth Roudinesco, "Georges Canguilhem, de la médecine à la résistance: Destin du concept de normalité," in Bing, Braunstein, and Roudinesco, *Actualité de Georges Canguilhem*, 39.

³⁴ Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, 61.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, introduction to Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*, 18.

³⁷ Greco, "On the Vitality of Vitalism," 20.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

losophy of error.” For life itself is an unstable, contingent, mingled life, prone to error; it develops between mechanical, organic-maintaining and vitalistic-creative determinations: life is brought forth out of states of life and nonlife. This shows itself in the so-called turn of the 1960s, and this is also what makes Foucault’s reference to such an ontology of life at all possible and provides the central stimulus for the role that the concept of life occupies in Foucault’s texts as a correlate of technologies of power and knowledge.

In this sense also Frédéric Worms speaks of the “profoundly renewed *but also assumed* [*profondément assumé*] ‘vitalism’ of Canguilhem,”³⁹ which must meet two challenges in the new philosophical moment that the 1960s represent: an epistemological one (the genetic revolution) and a historico-political one (the social norm). Worms describes Canguilhem’s turn at the same time, however, as “maintenance and shift” (*maintien et décalage*), which may be captured from an epistemological perspective as follows:

It is no longer in the object of knowledge but in its subject, that is, in its practice and its history, that the normative irreducibility of the “living” is certified. Even if “life” is rightfully the object of an objective knowing and may even turn out to be based on objective *a priori* facts—such as the genetic code—knowledge of these *a priori* will always remain the polarized activity of a living human.⁴⁰

Even if biological life is determined by the genetic code (and in this sense would no longer be understood as normative), knowledge itself will be thought of as a polarized activity and may thus be read as a realization of the (social) normativity of the human being. The historico-political problematization of this thinking finds its formulation in Foucault’s investigations on the clinic and the “medical glance,” which Worms now describes as another kind of “norm,” which is, in relation to the biogenetic vitality, antecedent “*en fait et en droit*.” Here it is a matter of the normativity of the discourses and systems of propositions, which are at the same time epistemological and politico-practical and which make life, in fact “life as polarity,” into its object, its effect:

It is under the clinical gaze, under the condition of this gaze and this discourse, that the polarity of the living and the dead (in the cadaver itself) opens, and it is not in the polarity of the normal and the pathological that the possibility and necessity of the experience of the clinic open.⁴¹

³⁹ Frédéric Worms, “La vie dans la philosophie du XXème siècle en France,” *Philosophie(s) française(s), Philosophie* 109 (2011): 83, my italics.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83–84. The famous “logic of the living,” which stands here paradigmatically for the radical changes that occurred with the discovery of the genetic code, likewise includes errors (mistakes of transmission), as Canguilhem explains in his text on errors. These errors undermine the conviction that the living develop in confrontation with the milieu, since its “logic” is already determined in advance by the genetic code. On this point, see Giuseppe Bianco, “Portées du nom ‘Bergson,’” *Philosophie(s) française(s), Philosophie* 109 (2011): 51–52n42. Canguilhem points out, however, that genetic errors exist in part latently and become pathological only in confrontation with the milieu. In this context, Macherey discusses the example—quoted by Canguilhem—of a nanny who first discovers on a trip into the mountains (i.e., in a different, unfamiliar milieu) that she, under certain but not “normal” conditions, suffers from hypotension. Macherey links to this, in turn, the internal connection between social and vital norms, since the fact that there is a world in which there are nannies, summer holidays, and wage relations between a bourgeois family and service personnel is an exclusively social fact. With this, Macherey shows that already in 1943, thus in Canguilhem’s *Essay*, the “situation” in which the nanny falls ill in the mountains with her hypotension “est à la lettre surdéterminé par des conditions relevant de normes vitales et sociales” (Macherey, “Normes vitales et normes sociales,” 82–83, my italics).

⁴¹ Worms, “La vie dans la philosophie du XXème siècle en France,” 84.

This means, not that the vital concept of life is abandoned or that Canguilhem turns away from vitalism, but rather that the peculiar constitution of life itself as a composite being or synthesis of vital and social, organic and mechanical, inner and outer determinations becomes thematic as something that is brought forth—synthesized—in the discourse or in the technologies of power and knowledge. This amalgamation, which, *on the one hand*, may be formulated in accordance with the concept of technology, is, *on the other hand*, central for the thesis, which is argued for here, that Foucault’s biopolitical technologies would find themselves in a mimetic relation (understood in connection with Canguilhem) to a life that itself makes its appearance as a synthetic concept. For life—Foucault reminds us most succinctly in *The Order of Things*—is a modern or, rather, synthetic concept in both senses, insofar as, *on the one hand*, its biological dynamic, taken up by biopolitics, aims at the formation of a synthetic whole, a global equilibrium, which finds its shape in the population; and, *on the other hand*, life is synthesized “as life,” that is, as something produced. It is a phenomenon that is made and understood in this biopolitico-economic perspective as an artificially organized nature.

BIOPOLITICS AS IMITATION OF LIFE

In this sense, Canguilhem’s concept of life and its vital dynamic can be made fertile for the understanding of social norms. A social *normativity* is conceivable that sustains in a double sense Foucault’s power-analytical investigations, insofar as it, *on the one hand*, informs the investigations on biopolitics and governmentality—for biopolitics functions, in contrast to discipline and sovereign power, *like* a social dynamic or normativity—and, *on the other hand*, opens a perspective into the synthetic life, that is, into its constructedness or artificiality, which understands life not as *essence* but rather as correlate, meaning exclusively in its implementation by strategies of power and knowledge, from which it is first produced. This second perspective, according to the thesis, has been *primed* by Canguilhem’s vitalistic investigations of life insofar as here the penetration, mimesis, or synthesis of vital and social phenomena, norms, or perspectives in life becomes conceivable.

Canguilhem’s ontology of life thereby inaugurates a philosophy of error, an understanding of life as produced from outside, in confrontation with its negative values. This “ontology” is reformulated by Foucault as a biopolitical mode of production: life appears in Foucault’s thought decidedly *not* as something ontological. On the contrary, Foucault investigates the mechanisms of knowledge and the technologies of power, which produce or call forth such a concept of life, as an “archaeological surface phenomenon.” Foucault’s concept of life thus designates a synthesized life, the origin of which turns up in Canguilhem’s thought, insofar as he describes “social” life as a mixed state between mechanical and organic, artificial and natural determinations, between first and second nature. In this way Foucault makes available a theory of power, the functioning of which consists in the projection, production, and imitation of such a living entanglement. Consequently, biopolitics does not refer to a given, dynamic life—but rather first produces it as something pseudoliving. Governmental biopolitics functions as a kind of machine of illusion that synthesizes “life as polarity” into the life of the population and rules in the artificial-natural milieu of governmental technologies.⁴² Foucault’s concept of biopolitics of the population as a power that penetrates life, and the connected formulation of governmentality as an intertwining

⁴² See Foucault’s analysis of the artificial-natural milieu of governmental technologies that he designates as spaces of security; Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978* (New

of self and foreign regulating and ruling, discloses itself only when one takes into consideration its borrowing from Canguilhem's figure of imitation: the socially constituted security norm *imitates* the vital dynamic of the living and transmits or, rather, disposes of it on a power-theoretical and practical level. A contemporary political knowledge in connection with Canguilhem is such that it is anchored *in* this relation, in this interconnection of vital and social norms, of natural and artificial processes, or, rather, in the synthesis that these processes grant in the concept of life. A