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Paul Rabinow

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French Enlightenment: truth and life

Paul Rabinow

Abstract

This paper considers the relations of truth, life and norm in the work of Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault. Foucault argued that in France it was in the philosophy of science that one finds the clearest formulations of the problems of rationality and the sovereignty of reason. This distinctive confrontation can be termed French Modern. For Canguilhem, an ontological and existential pathos arose from the fact that living beings were fated to struggle in the face of circumstances. For Foucault, this ontology became historical and political. For both, the key question was the relationship between life itself and the understanding of life. The paper concludes by reflecting upon some implications of the ways in which the relation between life and lived experience is posed today.

Keywords: ethos; pathos; modern; life; vivant; vecu; norm.

When it comes to 'life', Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault shared a common problematization even if, as would be expected, their responses to that problematization differed.¹ Canguilhem's unwavering preoccupation with 'life' concentrated on the regional history of science understood as a form of epistemological practice. This focus on the life sciences and their norms spans his entire career from his 1943 doctoral thesis, *Le Normal et le pathologique*, until the end of his life. Living beings and the truth claims made about them constituted Canguilhem's privileged object. Foucault's thematization of 'life' is more complex and intermittent. Broadly speaking, many of his earlier explorations developed along lines that intersected with issues he would eventually identify as bio-political, such as madness, the clinic, the sciences of man and the technologies of power; while, in his later work, Foucault's excavations of life were taken up as an ethical problem, especially in terms of sexuality and subjectivity but laterally in the related domains of medicine, dietetics, etc. Although 'life' was not as persistently Foucault's object in the way it was for Canguilhem, still, with his recurrent attention to the thematics of death and his reflections on the aesthetics of existence, Foucault's thinking was ultimately never too far from the subject.

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The term 'life', however, encompasses too many things. In order to gain a renewed analytic vigour it needs to be unpacked. The work of Giorgio Agamben is helpful in that light. Agamben underscores the fact that the ancient Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the term 'life' (Agamben 1997). Rather they had two semantically distinct terms: *zoe* and *bios*. The former referred to the simple fact of being alive and applied to all living beings (animals, men and gods); whereas the latter term indicated the appropriate form given to a way of life of an individual or group. Philosophic discussion employed the term *bios*, since the status of life as brute existence was simply not a question worthy of extended ethical or political reflection. This is not to say that the Greeks were oblivious to its existence. For example, Aristotle does refer to a god as *zoe*, in order to indicate that the god was a mortal being (*Met.*1072b: 28). Or, as in another passage, Aristotle observed that men were attached to sheer existence *per se*. In Book III of the *Politics*, he writes:

And for the sake of mere life (in which there is possible some noble element so long as the evils of existence do not greatly overbalance the good) mankind meet together and maintain the political community. Men cling to life even at the cost of enduring great misfortune, seeming to find in life a natural sweetness and happiness (like a beautiful day).

(*Politics*, Bk.III, Ch.5. 1278b: 23-31)

However, again, the quality that sets men off from other living beings is found in their moral and legal community, in that supplement of political life, intimately linked to language that elevates humans above the level of animal existence. Sheer signs of life, of brute existence, that so concern us today in our ethical reflections on such issues as 'brain death', would have been incomprehensible to the Greeks.

Michel Foucault was no doubt thinking of a distinction close to this one when he wrote: 'What might be called a society's "threshold of modernity" has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics place his existence as a living being in question' (Foucault 1979: 143). This putting-in-question, of course, takes the form of the historical development of bio-power. Foucault, famously, contrasted the sovereign's power of seizure unto death, his right to retaliation, his staging of an extravagant theatricality of violence, with a quieter and more insidious form of power relations that aimed at producing, nourishing and administering forces that exerted a positive influence on life. Approaching the shift in power relations from a different angle, Foucault characterizes it as a change from 'bio-history' to 'bio-power'. Gradually, especially after the agricultural advances of the eighteenth century when more or less stable surpluses of nourishment for a substantial proportion of Europe's population began to be sustained, a new space was opening up and becoming occupied.

this was nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques. It is not a question of claiming that this was the moment when the first contact between life and history was brought about. On the contrary, the pressure exerted by the biological on the historical had remained very strong for thousands of years. . . . Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that could be modified, and a space for which they could be distributed in an optimal manner. For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence. . . . Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself.

(Foucault 1979: 141–3)

Foucault, at least in his 1976 *La Volonté de savoir*, identified the rise of a 'normalizing society' as bio-power's central diacritic for modernity. Written in the wake of *Discipline and Punish*, the analytic force of that choice was compelling. However, today this stark claim requires further thought as we have a more complex understanding of 'bio' and 'bios' and the technologies that intimately link them. It is in that context that I furnish the elements of a comparison of the relations of life and norms in the work of Canguilhem and Foucault.²

Not accidentally, such an exercise revisits the ethos of modernity in its French form. In the last years of his life, Michel Foucault repeatedly returned to the question 'What is Enlightenment?' Although the essay of that title has received extensive critical commentary, one of its richest yet least explored hypotheses was that the Enlightenment had had 'different destinies', within the German, French and Anglo-Saxon traditions (others could be easily added to this list).³ German thinkers, in Foucault's preliminary and contestable formulation emphasized historical and political reflections on society, 'with one privileged moment: the Reformation; and a central problem, religious experience in its relation with the economy and the state' (Foucault 1978: 10). To locate a parallel domain (of events, institutions and practices) in France, Foucault argued, one must look to the philosophy of science. For it is there that one finds the clearest formulations of the critical questions about the sovereignty of reason. It is there that French thinkers confronted 'a rationality which claims to be universal while developing in a contingent manner, one which affirms its unity while proceeding only through partial modifications; which claims to be autonomous and sovereign but cannot be dissociated historically from the inertia, weight or coercion that subjects (*assujettissent*) it' (Foucault 1985: 7). The ethos of that distinctive confrontation might well be called French modern.

Foucault, in what has become his 'Introduction' to Canguilhem's *The Normal and the Pathological*, mused: 'If the great Cartesian rupture posed the question

of the relations between the subject and truth, the XVIIIth century introduced the questions of truth and life. . . . Must the understanding (*connaissance*) of life be considered as a privileged region for exposing the relations of truth, subjectivity and knowledge (*connaissance*)?' (Foucault 1978: xx, translation modified). As usual, the form Foucault gave to such questions allowed him to pose them as hypotheses and answer them in the conditional. Knowing that the question was to be answered in terms of Canguilhem's work, and what Foucault had learned from it, one might say that Canguilhem privileged 'knowledge' among the triad of terms and Foucault 'subjectivity'. However, it is evident that the status of subjectivity haunts Canguilhem's oeuvre and that the norms and forms of knowledge are omnipresent in everything Foucault wrote. As to truth? Both thinkers agreed with Nietzsche that it could be best approached through error.

French pathos

Georges Canguilhem's 1943 thesis, *The Normal and the Pathological*, signalled a major reversal in thinking about life and norms. Previously, French medical training had privileged the normal; disease or malfunction was understood as the deviation from a fixed norm. Such norms were taken to be constants. Medical practice was directed at scientifically establishing these norms and, practice following theory, towards returning the patient to health, to re-establishing the norm from which the patient had strayed. As Francois Dagognet observed, Canguilhem launched a frontal attack on the historical 'edifice of normalization' so essential to the procedures of a positivist science and medicine (Dagognet 1985: 30). He did so by questioning the status of the organism as a living being in an environment with which it had no pre-established harmony. Suffering, not context-free object standards, specified the state of disease. Each patient a doctor treats is a different case presenting its own particularity. One of Canguilhem's famous aphorisms drives this point home: 'An anomaly is not an abnormality. Diversity does not signify sickness.' With living beings, normality is an activity not a steady state. The result, if one follows Canguilhem's reasoning, is that 'a number, even a constant number, translates a style, habits, a civilisation, even the underlying vitality of life' (Dagognet 1985: 31). The recent discovery that our body temperature has a much wider range of normality than previously assumed illustrates this point. Normality, and this is one of Canguilhem's constant themes, means the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, to variable and varying environments.

Illness is a reduction to constants, the very norms by which we measure ourselves as normal. Normality equals activity and flexibility. Hence there is no purely objective pathology; rather, the basic unit is a living being in shifting relations with a changing environment. Arguing for a dramatic reversal, Canguilhem maintained that illness is ultimately defined by the terms that had defined health, namely stable norms, unchanging values (Dagognet 1985: 37). Life is not stasis, not a fixed set of natural laws set in advance and the same for

all, to which one must adhere in order to survive. Life is action, mobility and pathos, the constant but only partially successful effort to resist death, to use Bichat's famous definition of life as the ensemble of functions deployed to resist death. 'Life, whatever form it may take, involves self-preservation by means of self-regulation' (Canguilhem 1988: 128). Canguilhem's tightly written didactic forays display how the life sciences, including the therapeutic ones, have simultaneously elaborated concepts of life and how these concepts must be seen as an integrated part of the phenomenon under study, life and its norms.

Man's conceptual faculty, articulating an active relation to the environment, a normative mobility and projective ability is central to his health. 'Being healthy means being not only normal in a given situation but also normative in this and other eventual situations. 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' (Canguilhem 1989: 196). Life is an activity that follows a norm. Health is not being normal; health is being normative. Further, human beings conceptualize the situation in which life puts them. Although Canguilhem consistently proclaimed his vigilance about not turning these explorations into a vitalism, he demonstrates – and thereby inscribes – the omnipresence of evaluative notions like 'preservation', 'regulation,' 'adaptation,' 'normality', in both the everyday and scientific approaches to life. 'It is life itself, and not medical judgement which makes the biological normal a concept of value and not a concept of statistical reality' (Canguilhem 1989: 196). Life itself. Man's specificity is not that he is radically distinct from other living beings but only that Man has created systematic knowledge and tools to help him cope with the active normativity of life – life, it should be remarked, understood as much as survival as flourishing, *zoe* as much as *bios*, but, for Canguilhem that *zoe*, by definition, takes an active form.

In Canguilhem's work there are two meanings to life. First, there is life as form, life as the 'universal organization of matter'. Second, there is life as the experience of a singular living being who is conscious of his or her existence. Life is both the French present participle, of the verb 'to live', *le vivant*, as well as the past participle *le vecu*. Canguilhem is consistent and unequivocal: the first level (form) controls the second (experience). It is only the first level, the power and form-giving dimensions of life, which constitutes the explicit subject matter of his work, but the affective or affected presence of the second is frequently felt (Canguilhem 1983: 335). For all its declarative decisiveness, Canguilhem's claim of unquestioned priority of sheer life over its singular forms is shadowed and infused with an experiential double, pathos as a constant companion to life itself. In fact, from his 1943 thesis forward, it is the unsettled and unsettling relationship of concept and affect that yields an ethos of pathos characteristic not only of Canguilhem's own work but of the French problematization of life more broadly. As I argued in *French Modern*, 'Canguilhem identified a central concern in the French nineteenth-century life sciences: the belief that living beings and their milieus have no predestined harmony but are fated to struggle, through a

disciplined and relentless effort to adapt to constantly changing circumstances' (Rabinow 1996: 14). Canguilhem characterizes this situation as one of pathos. Existential pathos in France typically took neither the form of Romantic railing against fate nor resignation in the face of technology but, rather, pathos was turned into an active effort to reform things, infused with a vivid awareness of the unspecifiable certainty of error and the assured contingency of success. Norbert Elias identified the French tendency to seek cultural change and political order through normative social projects as a process of 'civilization', which he famously contrasted to the German intellectual emphasis on individual self-cultivation or 'Kultur'. Hans Blumenberg aptly named this French modern ethos 'missionary and didactic pathos' (Blumenberg 1983). Foucault and Canguilhem, in different ways, both suffered from and sought to re-form or stylize that pathos, that is to say, to think it as an ethos.

Pierre Macherey, in his essay '*De Canguilhem à Canguilhem en passant par Foucault*', argues that in the 1943 *Essai sur le Normal et le pathologique*, the concept of *le vivant* encompasses not only the singularity of a living being but, in Macherey's words, 'the *vivant du vivant* . . . this polarized movement of life which in each living being pushes it to develop as much as possible that which is present as its being or existence' (Macherey 1992: 288). In *Le Normal et le pathologique* Canguilhem spoke of '*l'effort spontané, propre de la vie, pour lutter contre ce qui fait obstacle à son maintien et à son développement pris pour normes*' (Canguilhem 1979: 77). In his 1963 *Naissance de la clinique*, Foucault provided what can be read as a compelling re-interpretation of Canguilhem's ontology (Foucault [1963] 1973). Macherey pinpoints the reversal, 'the living being is no longer the subject of normativity but has become its point of application' (Macherey 1992: 288). Experience became historical experience; epistemology became an historical event. Using a vocabulary Foucault employed later in his life, one might say that ontology had become historical and political. Thus, the defining maxim of Bichat – life is the sum of those forces that resist death – which Canguilhem had cited on a number of occasions as a general statement about living beings could, after Foucault's demonstration of a new configuration of life, death and institutions, no longer be accepted as a general description of the human condition but rather as a specific and singular historical and political event. As Foucault showed, it was the historical (re) structuration of clinical experience that situated Bichat's maxim and its institutional implications not a general ontology.

In the same year, 1963, twenty years after the publication of *The Normal and the Pathological*, Canguilhem himself revised his position on normativity. Having challenged the positivist ontology of norms as static, Canguilhem recast his own ontology. Although Canguilhem insisted in his *Nouvelles réflexions* of 1963 that he had little to change from his 1943 thesis, it is clear that he did. The fact that he wrote close to fifty pages of 'reflections' – an extremely sustained output for the notoriously economical Canguilhem – underscores the point. 'From the social to the vital' sketches a concise history of norms, and normalization, shifting the emphasis from a background normality to an active normativity. Norms

were not only active but were now taken up as historical, they were linked to normalization. 'Between 1759, the date of the appearance of the word normal, and 1834, date of the appearance of the word normalized, a normative class conquered the power to identify – a splendid example of an ideological illusion – the function of social norms through the usage that it made of them by determining their content' (Canguilhem 1989: 182–3). Historical structuration if ever there was one, even if the allusion to a 'normative class' should not be taken too literally. Consistently, Canguilhem persisted in differentiating the social and the organic as to their norms, their modes of regulation, their finalities. 'If social norms could be perceived as clearly as organic norms, men would be crazy not to conform to them. As men are not crazy, and as there aren't any Sages, it is because social norms must be invented and not observed' (Canguilhem 1989: 194). As excellent a formulation of missionary and civilizing pathos as one is likely ever to find.

Pathetic fallacies

Today, Foucault wrote in an essay devoted to Canguilhem written some twenty years after *The Birth of the Clinic*, the 'logos of life' is the play of the information of the genetic code and its 'decodage', as conceptualized in molecular biology and genetics (Foucault 1985). The substance of Foucault's claim is contestable (even though at the time it had been brilliantly elaborated by Francois Jacob in *The Logic of Life*, as well as by Canguilhem) and can legitimately be read as reflecting more the lingering rays of structuralism's setting sun than the emergent forms molecular biology has subsequently taken with the rise of genome mapping and biotechnology (practices that prime the manipulation of parts and treat DNA as inert matter). Regardless, the broader claim is that contemporary scientific understanding yields – or re-interprets – a problematic truth – life itself contains in its very essence the possibility, even the inevitability, of errors, albeit arbitrary ones. Some of these errors, mutations in the genetic code, can carry with them far-reaching consequences for lived experience.

Canguilhem and Foucault adopt a common stance towards this situation: the philosophy of the concept primes the philosophy of the subject. The *vivant* again primes the *vecu*: 'phenomenology sought the primary meaning (*sens*) of each act of understanding (*connaissance*) in lived experience (*le vécu*)'. It is important to be clear; there is no French irrationalism here, only a singular dedication to science (not opinion and communication) as that which philosophy must think. Nor, clearly, is it a question of deducing directly the norms and forms taken by living beings from a scientific understanding of life – as the current wave of Anglo-Saxon evolutionary socio-biology would have it. Rather, the challenge is to find a means to analyse 'the relationship between life and the understanding (*connaissance*) of life, and of following in that relationship the thin red line of the presence of value and of the norm' (Foucault 1985: 14). A sterling example of French modernity.

Both Foucault and Canguilhem, then take up the current understanding of life as error, as an ontology (thereby providing a new instantiation of modernity as pathos). Such an ontology, however, is an ontology of the present, that is to say, an historical and political ontology. The errors and contingencies of evolution and history have led to a living being, man 'who never finds himself comfortably fixed in a niche, a living being who devotes himself to wander and err (*a errer et a se tromper*)' (Foucault 1985: 13). As with life, so too, at the same time in parallel, yet radically different modes, with science and philosophy. Consequently, philosophy, in so far as it is simultaneously close to and separate from contemporary science, is consequently subject to correction, to revision. It is also dependent on *le vivant* and on the historical state of things and of the need to conceptualize that dependency as well as its autonomy. In what way is this *vivant vivant*? How much of our *vécu* can we reshape?

Life, today, is more *zoe* than *bios*; or, perhaps more accurately, many people are perfectly willing to attempt to reshape their *bios* in terms of *zoe*. The obsession with health, fitness, pre-natal diagnosis, life-sustaining systems, living wills, plastic surgery, evolutionary moralism - altruism - aggression, male bonding, gay genes, female relational capacities, Prozac, the child within, child abuse, cloning, diet, nutrition, etc., etc., etc., are indicators of this shift. Such efforts to give a form to the sheer vital dimensions of existence and to make that form a telos embodying and articulating the true, the good, and the beautiful, is nothing if not pathetic. The wretchedness lies in the giving over to the *vivant* what clearly belongs to the *vecu*. This abjection stems from a pathetic fallacy: 'pathetic fallacy noun. The attribution of human emotions or characteristics to inanimate objects or to nature; for example, angry clouds; a cruel wind.' In this case, it is the 'or to nature' that should be underlined. On the other hand, the abundant constructivisms and quasi-transcendental utopias that proceed as if their *vecu* was constrained only by the freely constituted actions of other agents have their own distinctive *folie*. As moderns, our task and our obligation is to be attentive to ways around knowledge that claims to be universal when it is contingent, unified when it is at best partial, and autonomous and sovereign when it is dependent and immature. We have no right to despise the present, as pathetic as it may be. But, of course, as modern thinkers, we have no need to endorse it either. We are simply obliged to live within it and struggle with - and against - its norms and normativity. All pathos, after all, is not fallacious.

Notes

Address for correspondence: Professor P. Rabinow, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, California, CA 94720, USA. Email: rabinow@uclink.berkeley.edu.

1 'What distinguishes thought is that it is something quite different from the set of representations that underlies a certain behavior; it is also something quite different from the domain of attitudes that can determine this behavior. Thought is not what inhabits a

certain conduct and gives it its meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem' (Foucault 1984: 388).

2 Giorgio Agamben identifies a 'zone' at the frontiers of bio-power, where the politics of *bios* turns toward a politics of *zoe*. This zone is one of sovereignty and bio-power, one of massacres and experiments, a zone of intervention where new apparatuses (*dispositifs*) are taking shape. Among these apparatuses one can point to 'humanitarianism' and 'bio-ethics'.

3 For the Greek variant, James Faubion, *Modern Greek Lessons: A Primer on Historical Constructivism*, Princeton University Press, 1993. Norbert Elias, for example, provides an alternative formulation of the French and German traditions: 'culture' and 'civilization'.

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