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## THE LAST LESSON OF MICHEL FOUCAULT: A VITALISM FOR A FUTURE PHILOSOPHY

*LA ÚLTIMA LECCIÓN DE MICHEL FOUCAULT:  
UN VITALISMO PARA LA FILOSOFÍA DEL FUTURO*

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### Abstract

We propose a vitalist reading of Michel Foucault's work going beyond the mainstream interpretation that divides his proposals into three dimensions: knowledge, power and subjectivation. We will start our interpretation with her last text: "Life: Experience and Science". This text contains three important elements. First, it offers a deep reflection about the meaning of 'life' in the work of one of Foucault's Masters, Georges Canguilhem. Second, it pays tribute to the value of his work in the transformation of philosophy. Finally, it offers reinterpretation of Foucault's own work. We will sustain that the last lesson of Foucault is to propose vitalism as the key way of thinking for a future philosophy. To put this forward, we should first direct our attention to the work of Canguilhem, and then we will explain how the dynamics of knowledge, power and subjectification can be read from a vitalist approach.

### Resumen

El presente artículo propone una lectura vitalista del trabajo de Foucault, la cual conjuga las tres dimensiones tradicionales con que se suele aprehender su trabajo: saber, poder y subjetivación. Nuestra interpretación comienza por su último texto: "La vida: la experiencia y la ciencia". En este, podemos encontrar tres importantes elementos. Primero: ofrece una reflexión sobre la "vida" en la obra de Canguilhem. Segundo: se rinde tributo a la importancia que tuvo su trabajo en la transformación de la filosofía. Por último, el texto aporta una reinterpretación del propio trabajo de Foucault. De este modo, sostendremos que la última lección de Foucault es proponer un enfoque vitalista como desafío para la filosofía del futuro. Para exponer esto, comenzaremos por dirigir nuestra atención sobre el trabajo de Canguilhem. Una vez hecho esto, explicaremos cómo las dinámicas de saber, poder y subjetivación pueden ser leídas desde un enfoque vitalista.

### Palabras clave

Foucault  
Vitalismo  
Canguilhem  
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*As living beings, we are the effect of the very laws of the multiplication of life.*

*Georges Canguilhem (1966/1991, p. 278)*

## Introduction

Gilles Deleuze (1986/1988) established the canonical and most relevant interpretation of Michel Foucault's work. The first put forward that the second articulated his reflections around three central concepts: knowledge, power and subject. Nevertheless, Deleuze (2013, 2014, 2015), in his courses on Foucault, opened a new surprising read-

ing. He vindicated the existence of a secret vitalism as a common denominator in Foucault's proposals: 'There is in Foucault a kind of vitalism, and we will see that it is really strange. Where does this vitalism come from?' (Deleuze, 2014, p. 285).

In this text we cover this statement and we propose a vitalist reading of Michel Foucault's work going beyond the mainstream interpretation that divides his work into three questions: one about knowledge, the second about power and a final one about subjectivation (Veyne, 2008/2010). We will start our interpretation with the culminating point of Foucault's work, that is, his text published just before his death: *Life: Experience and Science* (Foucault, 1985, in Rabinow and Rose, 2003). This text contains three important elements. First, it offers a deep reflection about the meaning of 'life' in the work of one of Foucault's Masters, Georgue Canguilhem. Second, it pays tribute to the value of his work in the transformation of philosophy. Finally, it opens some essential key points not only on the intellectual implications of life science based on scientific epistemology offered to the debate between two irreconcilable traditions (on the one hand, the philosophy of experience, sense and the subject, embodied in the figures of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty and, on the other hand, the philosophy of knowledge, rationality and the concept, best represented by Cavaillès, Bachelard, Koyré and Canguilhem himself), but also, and more importantly, to the reinterpretation of Foucault's own work.

'Life' is a relevant topic in our present. The interest in biosecurity, biosafety, bioeconomy, bioengineering, and bioterrorism, by disciplines so diverse as medicine, economy or ecology speaks volumes about this (Dobson, Barker and Taylor, 2013). In this vein, it is possible to say that in Sociology and Philosophy vitalism has been one of the main interests in the last decade (Caygill, 2007; Fraser, Kember and Lury, 2006; Lazarato, 2014/2015; Mullarkey, 2007; Olma and Koukouzelis, 2007; Parisi, 2007). The debates about 'The posthuman' (Cecchetto, 2013; Gray, 2001; Haney, 2006; Hayles, 1999) and the 'new materialism' (Barrett and Bolt, 2012; Coole and Frost, 2010; Crockett and Robbins, 2012; Lemke, 2014; Pfeifer, 2015) are directly linked with the discussion about vitalism and with the urgent process of reconceptualisation of living. To cite two simple examples, Rosi Braidotti (2006, 2014) is an author that vindicates a posthuman condition based on a new conceptualization of living matter, and Karen Barad (2007, 2008) puts forward the notion of agential realism as a way of articulating vitalism and materialism. Our vitalist reading of Michel Foucault connects with this general interest and it has the novelty of offering an interpretation from the point of view of life, a topic underpinning the proposals of one of the most quoted authors in the mentioned literature.

Foucault scarcely wrote about vitalism. It is possible to find a quote in *The Order of Things* (Foucault, 1966/1994) and in *The Birth of Clinic* (1963/1994). But he never put forward explicitly a definition or conception referring this idea. Nevertheless, he mentioned profusely the word life through all his books (Foucault, 1963/1994, 1966/1994, 1975/1995, 2010...), and as we argue in the next sessions a question about this notion is present in all the stages of his work. What is life for Foucault? He reminds us that life is that which is capable of erring, with the shortcoming being the essential eventuality that passes through its biology and evolution from start to finish. In this sense, Canguilhem declared in his *Writings on medicine* “Strictly speaking, nothing living has been completed” (Canguilhem, 2002/2012, p. 46), and it is in this erring and making mistakes, where Foucault visualizes the essential externality of life that leads him to put forward this unique and hereditary error that results in man being a dislocated and misplaced being. ‘And if we admit that the concept is the response that life is random, we should then agree that error is the basis of all human thought and history’ (Canguilhem, 2002/2012, pp. 55-56).

Thus, life is that which is capable of erring and this is the basis and the condition allowing for all thought. Additionally, by declaring that the concept is the response to the fact that life is random, normativity, both social and individual, is conceived as the tool to create the manner in which life relates to its surroundings, with itself and with the contingency. In other words, through life, a bridge spans, at least potentially, the gap between a philosophy of experience and the subject which gravitates around rationality and concept. Seen in this light, the three moments of Foucault’s work that so clearly describe and analyse Gilles Deleuze (1986/1988) take on another nuance and prominence. They are not merely three instances-plateaus that, while interconnected, possess a sort of autonomy and criteria of differentiation. What this philosophy of life does, rather, is to create the central coordinate of problematisation underlying Foucault’s thinking; the alternative being situated beyond the structuralism and the hermeneutics visualised by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (1982).

As posed by Georges Canguilhem (1966/1991), to live is to enter in the vital normativity in response to the anomaly in a kind of unformed language that is characteristic of life. But, what are its characteristics? Specifically, how is the clarification process regarding the knowledge of life and its integral concepts produced? To answer this question, we should first direct our attention to the work of Canguilhem, to later analyse in the notions of knowledge, power and subjectivity our hypothesis: namely, that the vitality underlies as the main leitmotif and source of creation for Michel Foucault’s thinking.

## The legacy of Georges Canguilhem

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In his prologue to *The normal and the pathological*, Dominique Lecourt (1971, p. XXIX), criticised Canguilhem's position regarding information and communication as being biologically inherited, in that this 'meant admitting that the individual has a *logos* that is inscribed, maintained and transferred (...) defining life as a sense that is inscribed within the matter, thus admitting to the existence of an *a priori* objective, of a material *a priori* and not only a formal one'<sup>1</sup>. What Lecourt failed to understand is the fact that this type of *unformed language that is characteristic of life*, to which we previously referred, is not related to DNA sequencing as the writer suggested. What it actually references is the idea of *biological normativity*. Canguilhem himself clarified this:

We may qualify types and functions as normal, because we refer to the dynamic polarity of life. If there are biological norms, it is because life, instead of being submissive to the environment, is an institution of its own surroundings and therefore, value is placed not only on the environment but also on the very organism itself. This is referred to as *biological normativity* (Canguilhem, 1966/1991, p. 175)

As Foucault (1985/2003) stressed, while phenomenology asked 'experience' for the original meaning of every act of knowledge, what we have before us is an investment that seeks and examines relationships in 'the living'; aiming to discover that which, through this knowledge, corresponds to the concept *in* life.

That is, of 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 (...) 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 immobilize life (Foucault 1985/2003, p. 475).

Or rather, as Guillaume Le Blanc (2004) suggested, they are the two basic elements that describe the status of the philosophical experience: a) a philosophical analysis of life cannot be made if it is not based on the normativity concept; and b) the normativity concept inevitably invokes the idea of life. That is, a sort of auto-productive recursiveness of the living that resembles a formulation that, from a neurobiological perspective, declares that the basic characteristic of life is to establish a particular type of organisation, to know, an *autopoietic* organisation (Maturana and Varela, 1985/1994; Varela, 2000). In other words, the *limit* plays a much greater and more diverse role than that of merely serving as a line of spatial demarcation, since, operationally speaking, this limit forms a part of the interior in the same way that the inter-

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<sup>1</sup> In this fragment, and in the following ones, the *italics* are from the original text.

nal relations make up a part of the production network that allows for the emergence of the membrane.

It is clear however, that Canguilhem's philosophy of life, on its own, falls short of being a *second rate cybernetic* perspective, but the recursiveness and self-generative nature of the living constitutes a significant meeting point. According to Canguilhem (2002/2012, p. 58) 'this body is, for a time, given and produced. Its health is, simultaneously, a state and an order'. In this vein, it is no coincidence that Pierre Macherey (2011) declared that Foucault and Canguilhem were the two principal intellectual pillars with regards to thinking about the immanence and power of 20<sup>th</sup> century normativity. Furthermore, as Le Blanc (2004) reminds us: *life is value*, and values predate human beings without being, however, transcendent. Therefore, the pre-existence of these values means that life is value and power, a force field in which self-organisation is continually produced and reproduced.

In this sense, Canguilhem (1966/1991) explicitly considered that human beings, in a more or less lucid manner, extend *a spontaneous effort, characteristic of life, in order to fight* against anything presenting an obstacle to its continuation and development, considered norms. It is in this frequency where we should calibrate Leriche's well-known statement that was so often repeated by Canguilhem: *health is life lived in the silence of the organs*. Thus, as a counterpart and enabler of this silence, the body's consciousness is produced *in the feeling of the limits*, of the threats, in which the experienced notion of normality depends on the possibility of the infringements of the rules: 'life is not indifferent to the conditions in which it is possible, that life is polarity and therefore, the unconscious position of value, in summary: that life is an act of normative activity' (Canguilhem, 1966/1991, p. 92).

Therefore, pathological disturbance does not exist alone, and the abnormal may only be appreciated within a relationship. Because —and this is of utmost importance— the guiding principles of this philosophy of life that we have attempted to define, do not arise from the abstract exercising of pure reason, but from a rigorous historical study of the epistemology of the life sciences. The medical arts (that is, clinical practice) are the other pillars of this approach, since, according to Canguilhem, 'the human technique prolongs vital impulses whose service aims to place a systematic knowledge that frees them from the numerous and costly trials and errors of life' (Canguilhem, 1966/1991, p. 97). As we will argue, the mentioned Canguilhem's proposals expand and spread with Foucault through a variety of subjects. From the common port of psychiatry and medicine, a trajectory is initiated in which the idea of creation/transgression of the *limit* plays a determining role conforming the main legacy of Michel Foucault: the notions of knowledge, power and subjection.

## Knowledge: beyond the autonomy of discourse

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Without a doubt, one of the most lucid and influential analyses made in regards to the thoughts of Michel Foucault was made by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (1982). In it, the authors considered that his philosophical proposal offered an alternative that transcends hermeneutics and structuralism in that it completely eliminates the notions of meaning, substituting them with a formal model of human behaviour that is governed by self-regulated transformations of elements; the phenomenological project of tracking all meaning behind the productive activity of transcendent subjects is avoided; furthermore, it eliminates the need to re-read the social meaning of the practices that reveal a mysterious hidden meaning. However, the authors claim that in its archaeological onset, Foucault's project made a strong effort to demonstrate that the human sciences may be analysed as if they had autonomy and an internal self-regulation in a kind of proposal in which all that is stated should be considered as *the object of discourse*. That is, the illusion of an autonomous discourse underlies this initial period of intellectual production.

Nevertheless, the illusion of the autonomous discourse disappears when considering the manner of thinking/approaching that we described in the previous section. What we may see, from this perspective, would be the display of a historical problematisation of the emergence of insanity and medicine (firstly) as a strategy of approaching the limit and from the limit, in a clear desire to explore the possibilities of exposure and transgression. In other words: a *zoom* is carried out on the moving edges and borders of the coordinates of the recursive and self-generating force field that makes up a type of vitalist thought. These borders are permeable and diffuse from a determined system in which it is defined in terms of power (insanity, the clinical, the literary experience, the emergence of the modern human sciences and the semi-transcendentals of life, work and language).

In this respect, it is necessary to mention Julián Sauquillo (1989) who discussed the great passion for the limits, for an excess of the rational, by which Foucault conceptualised insanity as the creative process of learning; Jean Lacroix (1968) who, in *Histoire de la folie* claimed that the true dimension of insanity was not so much being the object of knowledge but rather, a means of knowing; and Maurice Blanchot (1992) who mentioned that the said text was not so much a history of insanity but the outline of a history of limits, of some dark gestures that are rejected by a culture as pure exteriority. Alternatively, we can refer to Foucault (1964/1988) himself who affirmed that the history of insanity would be the *history of the Other*, which, for a culture, is simultaneously internal and foreign and should therefore, be excluded. So, the abnormal is that which arouses a theoretical interest in the normal. Rules are only recognised as

such in the infringements. Functions are only revealed based on their flaws. Life only reaches levels of consciousness and science on its own, when there is an inability to adapt, failure and pain. Thus, the study and analysis of this border of exteriority, which is also the determinant for deployment from the system's interiority, is clearly a fundamental issue in Foucault. In fact, knowledge appears as the result or the derivation of life breaking limits.

In this sense, another fundamental milestone of this period is the direct and explicit appearance of 'life' in semi-transcendental terms (together with work and language) through which humans are represented as finite beings. As Foucault (1966/1994) reminds us in *The Order of Things*, modern culture may consider man because they think about the finite based on man himself, while prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, neither the idea of man nor the power of life existed. Moreover, the change that occurred in natural history (the change in focus with respect to zoological collections and botanical gardens, for example), is not led by a desire to know, but by a new manner of connecting things, through both sight and discourse. One apparent externality of this rupture is related to the ever-greater influence of death. As Canguilhem (2002/2012, p. 47) masterfully summarised, 'illnesses are the instruments of life through which the living, men, are obligated to confess their mortality', and only through this mutation in biology, the sciences and medical practices does it become a principal and essential element. Thus, it is no coincidence that this author wished 'to end these new reflections on the normal and the pathological, outlining a paradoxical pathology of the normal man, demonstrating that the consciousness of biological normality considers the relationship with illness, the illness recourse, as the final linchpin recognised and therefore demanded by this consciousness' (Canguilhem, 2002/2012, p. 231). In other words, the creation of a limit through which man is created and individualised in terms of being a living being that participates in life.

Meanwhile, some may argue—even while provisionally accepting our reading hypothesis in general terms—that the previous statements continue to indicate an illusion of autonomous discourse. Thus, three elements should be noted. First, that the pre-eminent and prominent role of a determined topic does not imply the oblivion and/or downfall of that which is seemingly its opposite. For example, consider that *History of Madness* would be unreadable and inarticulate without the unveiling of the social practices that historically led to the peripheral confinement of the madness; that *The Birth of the Clinic* would not be readable without the analysis of clinical practice subsequent to the Revolution; that similarly, in *The Order of Things*, the emergence of the semi-transcendentals of life, work and language would not have been deployed without reference to the concrete practices influencing the mutation/rupture of natu-

ral history in biology, of the study of the wealth in political economics, and of general grammar in philology. Second, we should stress the importance of the call to emphasise the issue as an interaction between the border and the interior, between the normal and the pathological in a recursive derivation of self-production. Finally, while Foucault (1966/1994, p. 8) claims that 'language loses its place of privilege and becomes, in turn, a historical figure that is coherent with the density of its past', it must be recognised however, that this is based on the fundamental dimension through which the borders are infringed, widening the 'thinkable' margins (which, while implying a trend and a position, is not clearly comparable to the claim of discursive autonomy as an illusion).

Perhaps, this belief of Foucault may be seen more clearly in his conception of modern literature in regards to the experience of limits that extend beyond dialectic thought, as well as in his view of language as a basic form of the management of experience and the creation of subjectivity which, when taken to the extreme, to its ultimate consequences, allows us to reach the non-existent site of the unthinkable, to the amorphous and elusive region of heterotopia. Clearly, the similarities with respect to the thoughts of Martin Heidegger (1954/2013) and his conception of art and poetry are quite telling and substantial. However, pluralism is one of the areas of greatness within Foucault's lines of thought, his perspectivism that caused him to continually reposition and re-consider the topics and his own position regarding them. Therefore, the genealogical twist may be viewed as a change in emphasis for the perspective that, this time, no longer appears on the borders and the edges but rather, in the interior of the truth-producing relationships.

### Power: on this side of the limit as a subversion strategy

Gilles Deleuze (1986/1988) welcomed this new era of Foucault thought with great enthusiasm since, in it, he glimpsed the reinforcement and consolidation of a political philosophy project that had been beginning to blossom in the previous archaeological model. Not to disagree, we add that from our point of view, a more powerful (yet silent) effect of political commitment was deployed upon recalibrating the perspective inwards, towards the microphysics of power that extend to all segments of the population. This issue of power, not absent, had previously been restricted and linked to highly targeted participation spaces. On the one hand, there were the excluded groups (the homeless, insane, lepers, etc.) and, on the other hand, the transgressor artists who, for the most part, belonged to an elite population which was influential in its form and range of action. Thus, the possibilities of subversion were no longer the ex-

clusive property of figures such as Bataille, Artaud, Hölderlin or Blanchot, but were, at least to some degree, in reach of the entire population.

Having mentioned this, we shall now return to the central and problematic issue, not only essential to the analytical project of Foucault and Canguilhem, but also to the emergence of all Western thought: the link/connection of the *micro* (individual, subject, biological rule) to the *macro* (society, culture, social rule). Canguilhem's attitude with respect to this is somewhat wavering and ambiguous: at times he seems to believe that it deals with two immeasurable dimensions while at other times, he reveals a clear enthusiasm for it, taking the form of a vitalism that transcends and is inherent at both levels.

The social organisation phenomena are like a mimicking of vital organisation in the same way that Aristotle claims that art imitates nature. Here, imitation does not mean copying, but rather, a trend to rediscover the sense of a production. (Canguilhem, 1966/1991, p. 200)

And, at this point, it goes without saying that said *production sense* is the recursive and self-production dynamic of oneself that simmers like some inarticulate language that is pre-existing without being transcendent. Yet, as we mentioned previously, Canguilhem also believed that the human *technique* prolonged vital impulses, claiming that the value of Leriche's teachings lies in the 'fact that it is a theory of a technique, a theory for which the technique exists not as a meek servant taking intangible orders but as an advisor and cheerleader, attracting attention to concrete problems and guiding the research' (Canguilhem, 1966/1991, p. 71). Not to be satisfied with this, Canguilhem later underscored the fact that 'all human technique, including that of life is registered in life, that is, in an activity of information and assimilation of the material. The vital technique is not considered a rule, as compared to the human technique, which would indeed be considered as such. To the contrary: *because life is an activity of information and assimilation it constitutes the basis of all technical activity*' (Canguilhem, 1966/1991, p. 95, that in italics is ours).

These statements are deeply related with Heidegger's proposals (1954/2013) and his question regarding technique. 'Technique is not, therefore, a pure medium, technique is a manner of coming out of the hidden' (Heidegger, 1954/2013, p. 15), which, in ancient Greece, not only referred to doing and knowing how to do like a general worker, but also referred to art in the general sense of the word, to *poiesis* (in regards to 'understanding' since knowing means coming out of the darkness). 'Therefore it isn't merely an act of man or a simple means within the limits of this act', Heidegger states, 'it does not occur only *within* man or in a manner that is determined *by him*' (Heidegger, 1954/2013, p. 25). Thus, technique came later in terms of historical obser-

vation but in the actual historical acts, it occurred earlier. According to Canguilhem, this is the equivalent to claiming that *the abnormal, logically secondary, is first, existentially speaking*. However, technical domain in modern day society, according to Heidegger's celebrated statement, condemned the oblivion of the self. In light of this, Foucault (1981/2005) suggests that, instead of focusing on how the western *tekhne* sealed off the oblivion of the self, the equation should be flipped, and we should ask: based on what *tekhne* was the western subject formed? And, where did the games of truth and error, freedom and constraint that characterise these subjects initiate?

However, the question about subjectivation does not appear until power is deeply analysed (in fact, the previous quotation is taken from Foucault's instructions in the *Collège de France* from 1981–1982). Thus, in this era, the focus was placed on the study of technique, from technique and towards technique (penal, governmental, biopolitical). A technical domain of devices in which institutions are understood as constricting entities that, nevertheless, are the primary producers/creators of truth; in which power is not so much a property as it is a strategy, and its effects may not be attributed to an appropriation, but to provisions, techniques, tactics and functions; in which it acts more than it possesses, not being an acquired or maintained privilege of the dominant class, but rather, the collective effect of its strategic positions.

In this context, Gilles Deleuze (1986/1988) proposed the idea of the *diagram* in order to understand the Foucault approach to power. A diagram is the display of the power relationships that make up power, and these power relationships are located *not above*, but within the very fabric of the agencies that are created. In a way, like Deleuze, we can say that the diagrams communicate above, below and in between the respective layers; they are forces in a constant state of change that underlie history.

This means that the diagram, in so far as it exposes a set of relations between forces, is not a place but rather 'a non-place': it is the place only of mutation (...) through which forces pursue their mutant emergence. This is why the diagram always represents the outside of the strata (...) But the outside concerns force: force is always in relation with other forces, forces necessarily refer to an irreducible outside. (Deleuze, 1986/1988, pp. 85-86)

Nevertheless, one aspect remains unsolved in this definition: how can we conceptualise the mentioned outside? From our point of view, this indomitable outside is the inarticulate language of life that is, simultaneously, the symphony that decays its interior. His beliefs regarding the outside, affirming that we are in the presence of a sort of 'diagram-life', in which the abstract machinery that Deleuze spoke of, would play the same role in the *autopoietic* organisation of the living as procurement does in the particular structural material.

However, all that has been previously described inevitably leads us to conclude that theorisations on biopolitics and biopower (the second explicit and direct emergency of Foucault in regards to life), is not, under any circumstances, and as specialised critics have naively asserted, the peak point in which the issue of life arises in Foucault's works. They clearly play a major role (particularly in the transition towards the issue of the subject, sexuality, and techniques of the same), but in some way, they are the priority axis and are more elaborated in this area, in the same way that the techniques of governing and managing life are precisely that: 'techniques' that, in the sense that we have alluded to, are subsidiaries of a logic that immanently characterises life and that also constitutes only a defined segment of a vitalist thought /diagram having a much greater scope.

It is possible to situate the studies of contemporary governmentality and biopolitics, both Anglo-Saxon (Nikolas Rose, 2007, would be the main example) and continental (Hard and Negri, 2000/2002, or Agamben, 1995/1998, would be the principal exponents) in these misaligned coordinates. An interesting example, in this sense, is the work of Roberto Espósito (2004/2008), who, in an interesting book on biopolitics and philosophy, criticised Foucault for never responding (or having done so in an ambiguous manner) to the question of why the politics of life is always threatened with becoming a death act. In this regard, Espósito emphasises that 'the opposing interpretations of biopolitics that currently confront each other—one being radically negative and the other, being almost euphoric—only serve to absolutise, increasing the divide between them' due to the presence of an 'epistemological uncertainty attributable to a lack of a more ductile paradigm' (Espósito, 2004/2008, pp. 16-17), that the author points out using the logic of *immunisation*. It is an interesting bet, neither original nor useful when considering the teachings of Canguilhem—'illness is the risk of the living as such' (Canguilhem, 1998, p. 35)— and a less blurred view with respect to the collective works of Foucault. It is precisely with this impulse and understanding spirit that we shall now consider as emergent property of the living.

## Subjectivation: experience, truth and creation

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In his course about Foucault, Deleuze insists that this had a real necessity to go beyond the notion of power. He felt that his analysis led to a cul-de-sac in that power was ontologized and became the beginning and end of any kind of explanation about institutions and social reality. Breaking this limit would mean discovering the ancient practices of Greeks, a society of free agents responsible for understanding how power can be a strength fold over the individual. The result of this operation of folding would be understood as subjectivation. 'The inside is always the inside of the outside'

Deleuze (2015, p. 24). And this is, in Deleuzian terms, the main topic of the last books of Foucault.

Nevertheless, if we read with attention the books dedicated by Foucault to the History of Sexuality (1976/1988, 1984/1990a, 1984/1990b) we don't find any definition of subjectivation as a kind of fold, as the constitution of an inside from the strengths of the outside. In that sense, the quotes mentioned by Deleuze in order to justify his affirmation about subjectivation come from texts corresponding to the first stage of Foucault's work, we mean *Madness and Civilization* or *The Order of the Things*. Attending to the specific definitions of Foucault about subjectivation, we find three vindications: a) the experience as a way in which the subject recognises himself as subject, b) the relations that can be established with truth (understanding this as what can be thought and how to think in an historical moment), c) creation as the possibility of thinking of a different way in order to govern ourselves. In short, we don't find in Foucault's latest works a question about how to go beyond the limits of power, instead there is an articulation of three topics: experience, truth and creation. That is, the relevance of ancient Greek in Foucault is not due to its finding of how to work with strengths, but its interest in creating a society in that self-government is understood as a political, aesthetical and moral imperative combining experience and truths. So, Foucault's proposal is the creation of moral personal limits given that a universal moral law is unthinkable. In this context, the last text prepared by Foucault and mentioned at the beginning of this paper, acquires its complete sense: life is a matter of experience and truth. Both are relevant and its combinations show the contours of our lives.

The text points out to a particular vitalism with two objectives. First, it is a sort of mediator between a philosophical tradition concerned for the production of truth and a philosophy focused on experience, contingency and novelty. Second, it is a common denominator in his concerns about knowledge, power and subjectivation. So Foucault, ensured that, in some way, his works are not only about knowledge or power but also, about the subject and life. Furthermore, this concern may be found even in his initial writings. An example of this is seen in the 1954 introduction written by Foucault (1994/1999) for *Le rêve et l'existence* by Ludwig Binswanger, in which we can clearly see his sympathy for the hermeneutic-ontological tradition deployed in *Being and Time* by Heidegger.

However, unlike Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982), we do not consider that the so-called genealogical twist of Foucault implies a break with said tradition/problematisation through a rapprochement to Nietzsche. Rather, what we have (as attested in this later section) is a series of changes of perspectives over a long philosophical trajectory that, nevertheless, maintained axial concerns (with a transversal influence of the

thinking of Heidegger, Nietzsche and Canguilhem) allowing for the creation of a collective reading such as that proposed by this work.

In the genealogical era, for example, if direct and explicit concern existed regarding conceiving the truth as a privileged object of political appropriation subject to production rules and games, in this new period, said insistence exists as a stage on which the show is folded and unfolded (this time in the form of subjectivity), only having an emphasis that is more directed towards sexuality and the so-called 'own techniques'. In other words, and returning to the teachings of Canguilhem, we may say that a framework is created in which the issue of *normativity* is presented in the forefront. According to Le Blanc (2004), given that life is defined by its diverse forms of individualisation, it is impossible to exclude individuality when trying to understand what exactly life is.

The concept of *normativity* gives an account of the necessary relationship between life and individuality. Normativity is the tool through which the individual, human or animal, is individualised. After this point, the living being was no longer considered as a mechanism; it was considered to be a power. (Le Blanc, 2004, p. 46)

Considering the *being* as a *potentiality* under the auspices of the *rule*; herein lies the greatness of this philosophical proposal.

Furthermore, when we state, along with Canguilhem, that the human being prolongs the spontaneous effort characterising life by fighting against that which opposes its continuance and development, considered to be rules, we are alluding to this contingency in terms of determination/opportunity. As Le Blanc (2004, p. 86) pointed out, in this way, there is a correspondence between ethics and life, since value is something inscribed in the very entrails of the living being. 'The subject extracts the immanent values of life from the rules. There is no separation between life and value because life itself is value. However, while life is an inconsistent position of value, the ethical subject consciously formulates his values'. And it is in this space/derivation of 'responsibility' where Foucault's problematisation is located in regards to the subject's relationship with the truth (founding axis of modernity) and to the subject in relation to life (emerging axis specifically described in *Life: Experience and Science*). Thus, in addition to providing us with some renovated coordinates of thought and action (that is, both a final observation as well as the trail of its own trajectory), Foucault immunises us from the limited and simplistic interpretation of *the ethical as an aesthetic of existence* that is so often referred to and that merely serves to weaken and impoverish. What it refers to, in fact, is a return to the distorted uniqueness of heterotopy. The proposal is simple and risky at the same time: to rethink life.

## Conclusions

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Giorgio Agamben, in a short paper titled *An absolute immanence* (1999), has pointed out that both Foucault's (1985/2003) and Deleuze's (2005) final texts are dedicated to life. And this is not a mere coincidence; on the contrary it is the legacy of a way of thinking that is announcing the form of the philosophy and social thought in our present. As we have mentioned, all the current concerns about biomedicine, biosecurity, biotechnology and so on are only signals of this prevalence of Life in our present day. A very well-known example is the recent debate regarding the issue of post-humanism (Braidotti, 2006, 2014; Sloterdijk, 2009/2014). Referring to this idea, Peter Sloterdijk (2009/2014) insists that this millennia-long incubator no longer produces *humans* since the current coordinates by which beings are deployed have been provided by mass media, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology (opening an interesting line of thought with regard to the possibility of modern technology intervening in the future development of the species, understood as non-subjective biotechnological derivation, currently in a decisive moment in terms of the politics of species). That is, post-humanism as a response/alternative to a world where it is ever more difficult to distinguish between the natural and the artificial (if such a distinction is even necessary) and in which the writing/reading axis that humanist culture creates has lost importance due to the emergence of new means of communication and expression; in which a xenolatric attitude returns and the need for the development of ecological thought is suggested in the widest possible sense, considering both the technological as well as the natural environment. Obviously, these considerations are interesting. Nevertheless, the vitalism in Foucault's work puts forward three interesting points in order to rethink life and our present.

First, vitalism doesn't mean vindicating a kind of mysterious power animating human or animal life. That is, it is not a *zoé*, the other side of *bios*, which goes through every living being and is able to connect us in big arrangements. On the contrary, life is unthinkable without a reflection about knowledge, power and subjectivation. Life, in erring, is able to produce these three elements. Second, in this sense, the distinction between *bios* and *zoé* (popularized by Agamben) or even between those notions and *tekhne* is insufficient and simplistic. Life is more than a qualification, more than a secret animal power or more than a seamless web with technology. It is a constituent process, a permanent exercise of redefining limits, but it is always incorporated with assemblages of knowledge, power and subjectivation. That is, life is always a regime of vitality in that we find truths, power relations and definitions of ourselves. Recently, in a similar line of thought, Ayo Wahlberg and Nikolas Rose (2015) suggested the notion of 'governmentalization of living' in order to analyse the structures that try to

calculate, track and visualise the mentioned erring of life. This opens an interesting line of research for Social Sciences focused on the analyses of the different forms and mechanisms constituted in order to manage the secure, foreseen and expected transformation of limits due to the assemblages of knowledge, power and subjectivations created by life. Third, Foucault's work never defined life by a positive or affirmative component, as is the case of classics like Nietzsche and Deleuze or the contemporaneous Rosi Braidotti or Karen Barad. Rather, vitalism in the first author is simultaneously transcendental, that is, it is pointing to a limit broken by the constituent action of life (similar to the proposals of Kant or Heidegger). In this sense, it is not strange that Deleuze linked Foucault's vitalism with the relevance that death as a limit has in his works; and even Foucault himself dismissed classical vitalism arguing that it was a naive and simplistic way of understanding the relation between life and death: stabilising both terms as the two permanent rivals in a battle. In Foucault's vitalism, life is closely entwined with death; one gives form to the other and both are entangled in an agonistic dance. Finally, it is worth noting that this kind of simultaneously positive and negative conceptualization of life is not the legacy of authors such as Nietzsche, Heidegger or Deleuze but rather the remnants of Canguilhem. And, as Agamben (1999) has defended, these are the real clues for understanding how vitalism will become a future philosophy.

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