

Transversal: International Journal for the Historiography of Science, 4 (2018) 3-7

ISSN 2526-2270

[www.historiographyofscience.org](http://www.historiographyofscience.org)

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## Dossier Georges Canguilhem

### Introduction

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24117/2526-2270.2018.i4.02>

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Georges Canguilhem was born under the sign of Gemini on July 4, 1904 in Castelnaudary in Southwest France. A student at the *Lycée Henri IV* where he became a fervent disciple of Alain, he later enrolled at the *École Normale Supérieure* in 1924 and in 1927 obtained an ‘aggregation’-type degree in philosophy. In the early 1930s, his enthusiasm for Alainism began to wane and became profoundly imbued with a spirit of pacifism that proved to be increasingly incompatible with the inter-world wars context. Appointed to the post of professor of philosophy, first in Béziers and later in Toulouse, he began to study medicine. The rupture with the figure that had been the great philosophical inspiration of his youth became definitive and with France under occupation by the German troops he enrolled in the faculty of medicine while at the same time taking an active part in the French Resistance movement which he joined alongside Jean Cavallès. From his new academic qualification in medicine resulted a thesis entitled *Essay on some problems concerning the normal and the pathological* published in 1943. The introduction of that work became famous for a passage in which he declared that what philosophy expected from medicine was “an introduction to the concrete human problems”. He became a National Inspector of Education in 1948 and, in 1955, a professor at the *Sorbonne* where he was the successor of Gaston Bachelard as director of the History of Science Institute, a post he held up until 1971. Georges Canguilhem’s vast and powerful work unfolded in a markedly discreet way and yet even so, as Michel Foucault insists, one will understand little or nothing of the French intellectual environment up to the 1970’s if one ignores it and it could even be said that it has still not stopped diffusing its influence. One concept taken from the work of Gaston Bachelard under whose supervision he who had developed the *Thesis on the Formation of the Reflex Concept in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, also defines Canguilhem’s philosophy. It was the concept of *engagement* whereby the spirit seeks whatever is typically human in experience; that which drives and affects the reflex. That, and no other, is the reason why philosophy must fundamentally interest itself in that which is strange to it (see Canguilhem 2009, 7). That engagement envisages an integrality which, returning from the concrete gets back to the idea; one which in the end re-establishes whatever there is of the spiritual in every action, in every practice. That

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was the standpoint which the philosopher never tired of praising and emphasizing in his life and in the works of individuals like Jean Cavaillès. Canguilhem died in September 1995.

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It is really a very sad fact that

we will never have the *Treatise on Marxist Philosophy* that Politzer might have written, its absence is felt almost like a form of torture, nor will we have that on *Mathematical Dialectics* whose delineation the works of Albert Lutmann give us a glimpse of, just a glimpse, nor Cavaillès' *Treatise on Logic* which would have given us a new theory of concept, a theory that the final phrases of his admirable philosophical testament work, the study *On Logic and the theory of sciences* announces, but only announces: 'it is not a philosophy of conscience but a philosophy of concept that can provide a doctrine of science. The driving need is not for an activity but for a dialectics'. (Koyré 2010, 63)

Indeed, as Koyré himself put it in that same article of 1947, nothing can be so false as that "stupid saying, that slogan of mediocrity: 'nobody is irreplaceable'. The loss of a great spirit is undeniably irremediable" (Koyré 2010, 63). However, we still have the works which other great spirits were able to bring to our knowledge, works that good fortune has preserved and imposed remorse on every worthy survivor. Without a doubt *The normal and the pathological* is one such work and it offers us a renewed understanding of the reciprocal determinations between the living beings and their environment; a radical revision of the logic of the determination of the organisms by the requirements that other lives impose on them; relationships whose mechanics are open because they are constantly confronted with new and unexpected possibilities. In that way Canguilhem formulated his biological philosophy and proved to be capable of achievements such as the rehabilitation of a philosopher like Auguste Comte, previously held to be *passée*, and he even managed to bring about the renovation of vitalism which he was to defend to the end, in defiance of a considerable number of critics.

Thus Canguilhem transposed to philosophy what could perhaps be considered the most elementary principal of Claude Bernard's experimental medicine; "first, go to the hospital". What, however, is the meaning of that transposition? In 1963 Canguilhem, in his condition as a professor at the Paris Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, took up once more the theme of what he had taught twenty years earlier at the University of Strasbourg's Faculty of Medicine. It was his opportunity to introduce "new reflections" to that earlier essay on medical philosophy. While it is true that with Claude Bernard, medicine stopped being anatomopathological and became experimental, the question was: how would philosophy, in turn, be able to achieve its encounter with experience? In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, phenomenology sought the foundations for an answer to that question by delving beneath immediate, direct experience, that is, the materiality of the world and of knowledge itself. Doing so however, widened the gap separating the interior and exterior and perpetuated the schism between the spirit and all that which would always be strange to it in one way or another and, accordingly, philosophy, albeit by the most tenuous of threads, has remained connected to a classical perspective: the sense of phenomenology, in fact, continues to be the vision. The phenomenological concept of the world, of the experienced world, seems to be the negation of the epistemological notion of the medium or *mi-lieu*; an uncertain place, neither internal nor external. At the same time another philosopher, Henri Bergson, an admirer of Claude Bernard, opened the way for the advent of the concept, and insofar as he recuperated the problem of time as being the central theme of all philosophy and all metaphysics, he also opened the way for the idea that knowledge can only be thought about

historically. Canguilhem, who in his youth had rejected the concrete in the way Politzer says Bergson had conceived it, that is “as the concrete aspect of a philosophy that merely endeavored to animate classical abstraction” (Canguilhem 2012, 223),<sup>2</sup> after his medical studies during the German occupation of France, his experience in the Resistance and his experience of war, came to Bergsonism with other eyes and realized that Bergson was precisely the one who had best perceived “the organic nature of moral norms, given that they are social norms” (Canguilhem 2009, 185). That was the unity of experience that was to permeate all of Georges Canguilhem’s philosophy: life cannot be thought about apart from the creation of values, because its activity, together with the material that affects it and from which it serves itself to conserve itself and together with the relations that it is obliged to establish and constantly renovate, constitute an organic whole. However, Canguilhem’s analyses of the confrontation between social norms and the vital norms are basically directed at determining the signification of the latter and he wrote that: “It is with the organism in view that I allow myself certain incursions into society” (Canguilhem 2009, 173).

That is not unreasonable because, after all it is a question of epistemology and, right to the end, Canguilhem remained faithful to Bachelard’s teachings. It means that, as we can see from the studies put together in 1968 in the book *Studies of the history and philosophy of the sciences* and in those that make up *Ideology and rationality in the history of the sciences and of life* (1972), all his reflection seeks to examine the truth in that field or region in which the natural is inserted in a dynamics, or to use Bergson’s term a “*mouvance*”, which is radically its own and which requires that the thinking, to remain within the bounds of truth, should state, should formulate that position according to the means at its disposal. So, just as there is no such thing as sickness, so there is also no truth. However, at the same time, there is knowledge just as there is medicine. Like death, which is nothing more than the failure of the force that defines the life of a living being to preserve its activity, the mistake is that which opens to thought, to theory, the always provisional space of that which it is still possible to refer to as truth. So, to take up the catch phrase of the famous conference that Canguilhem gave in 1966,<sup>3</sup> just as the history of the sciences must constantly ask itself what it is the history of, so epistemology must ask itself what it is the philosophy of. Furthermore, it is the extent to which it is capable of seeking a way to formulate an answer to that question that epistemology will become historical. It would seem that it is precisely for that reason that, in the introduction to the book *The knowledge of life*, in which Canguilhem takes up all the more central elements of his thinking, beginning with his analysis of the “aspects of vitalism” we find this: “We think that a reasonable rationalism must know how to acknowledge its limitations and integrate the conditions for exercising it. Intelligence can only be applied to life by acknowledging the originality of life. The theory of life has to have its idea of the living from the living” (Canguilhem 2009, 16).

Being aware that there can only be theory involved in the perspective of an idea, that is, no concept and no knowledge can constitute themselves without metaphysics, Canguilhem himself never forgot that what every and any metaphysics, every and any theory seeks, in the final analysis, is experience and the concrete. That is why philosophy must take an interest in science and why a philosopher must seek for the true lessons as for example in the medical experience, in hospitals, in the painful effort that sickness demands of life and which, reciprocally, life imposes on itself to resist and to impose the values it creates in order to carry on. Thus we can consider philosophy to be “the specific secretion of philosophers”. In reality, science has no need of philosophy (see Canguilhem 2015, 1108). In short it is only through science and techniques that the philosopher can expect to be encompassed in truth; only

<sup>2</sup> This was in a review that Canguilhem published in Alain’s journal praising Georges Politzer’s anti-Bergsonian pamphlet.

<sup>3</sup> I refer here to the conference “L’objet de l’histoire des sciences” which appears as the introduction in the book *Etudes d’histoire et de philosophie des sciences* (Canguilhem 1972, 9-23).

science places philosophy in the encompass of that truth which for a long time it intended to define without realizing that there is no such thing as “the truth of the truth” (see Canguilhem 2015, 1126). As Jean Hypolite explains very well, for the philosopher, entering into truth means “entering in contact with his times, not through the work of epigones but instead through a profound contact with that which his day stammers out to him” (see Canguilhem 2015, 1136). That is the work that Canguilhem endeavors to carry out in the course of his works and which makes them fundamentally important. It is precisely for the stuttered utterances of our times that Canguilhem’s reflections can arouse not only the spirit but also the muscles. Behold the work of philosophy, the very work to which he dedicated himself, facing up to all the risks not only with his word but with his example.

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Ever since the publication of the *Complete Works* began in 2012, the importance of Georges Canguilhem’s philosophy has been increasingly perceived around the world. In the hands of Camille Limoges the project has gathered together some of the most competent scholars of his work around a series of Canguilhem’s unpublished works, sparse documents, writings and sayings. Facets of his work have been discovered or rediscovered some of which were previously entirely unknown or had been forgotten. As a result, the number of manifestations of the most varied types has been multiplying: meetings, colloquia, publications, studies, theses. Could it be that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the century of Canguilhem? The present dossier, albeit with no intention of answering that question, is part of the movement referred to and its publication should roughly coincide with the publication of Volume V of the *Complete Works*. After the volume which brought together almost all of his “political and philosophical writings” in the period 1926 to 1939 (Volume I) and the volume dedicated to presenting his texts and other manifestations during the period 1940 to 1960 which mainly address the “the history, biological philosophy and resistance of the sciences” (Volume IV), this third publication (of the planned five volumes) will be dedicated to the “history of sciences, epistemology and commemorations” referring to the period 1966 to 1995.

A considerable part of the texts being published here stemmed from the conferences presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Colloquium of History and Philosophy of Sciences which took place at the Federal University of Goiás in 2017 as a result of a joint initiative of that university’s faculties of History and Philosophy. The event brought together researchers and university lecturers from Brazil and other countries around themes present in Canguilhem’s works. Furthermore, the dossier also has contributions made by other scholars willing to make a commitment to ensuring that the event and this publication would materialize (which, after all, is a lesson one learns when one reads Canguilhem’s work not just correctly but also sincerely). What we hope for and expect from the publication is that it will contribute in some way to the diffusion of his thinking and of the lessons that emanate from him and which have shown themselves to be so necessary in our own day and age.

Almost everywhere one hears people saying that our times are ailing. Perhaps, however, the deafening cries of our actuality are not calling so much for answers, cures or medicines, but much more for ears capable of perceiving their whispers. That is the kind of attention that the author of *The normal and the pathological* and of *The knowledge of life*, he who was “at the same time near to Nietzsche and far from him” (Foucault 2008, 1594) learned from the war and from medicine: it is a lesson that still deserves to be studied in the philosophical sense of that word.

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