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Is there a theory of the subject in Georges Canguilhem?

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Abstract

Although there is no clear-cut doctrine of the subject in the work of Georges Canguilhem, nevertheless there is a sense in which the subject functions as a kind of operator in his work. This article delineates three aspects of such an operative function: a quasi-ontological discontinuity separating the living from the non-living; a discontinuity separating technique from science; and an ethical discontinuity that can be exemplified in the case of medicine. It is at these points of discontinuity that the notion of the subject effectively comes into operation in Canguilhem's work.

Keywords: Canguilhem; theory of the subject; history of biology.

Is there a doctrine of the subject in the work of Georges Canguilhem? Of course, it might seem unnecessarily complicated to put to a work of history and epistemology a kind of question that this work explicitly avoids. I allow that this complication may be a philosopher's failing and in my defence I call upon witnesses who are so disparate that it may well be concluded that what is at stake is a question of morality or immorality.

The most suspect of these witnesses might be none other than Heidegger, who, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, claims that 'it is in the very nature of philosophy never to make things easier but only more difficult' (Heidegger 1974: 11). The less suspect witness is Georges Canguilhem himself, who concludes his essay on 'The question of normality in the history of biological thought' in this way: 'For I maintain that the proper function of philosophy is precisely to complicate matters, not only for the historian of science but for man in general' (Canguilhem 1988: 144).[1] So, let us complicate things and, if I may put it in this way, complicate them *unreservedly*.

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It is clear that there is no explicit doctrine of the subject in Georges Canguilhem's work. Such is the simple fact of the matter. What complicates things is that the subject, often employed by Canguilhem in the capitalized form of the Subject, none the less functions as an operator brought in at strategic points of the intellectual enterprise to which we are giving homage.

No doubt all these strategic points are situated on a line of cleavage and have a seismographic value. They indicate the faults or discontinuities between the tectonic plates of the thought and what it controls in its actualization. I believe three such discontinuities can be identified:

- A quasi-ontological discontinuity which is presented as a natural separation of the living from the non-living.
- An operational discontinuity which distinguishes technique from science.
- A primarily ethical discontinuity which, in medicine, links together the dimension of knowledge (*savoir*) and what might be called the dimension of closeness (*proximité*).

If, for Canguilhem, living is always in some way a presubjective aptitude on the basis of which any possible subject arises, it is because living can be understood only in connection with the three essential notions of centre, or centring, norm and meaning. A first approximation, a sort of formal schema or virtuality of the subject, is to be found here in this knot of centre, norm and meaning. The knot will be formulated in the following way, for example: every living being is a centre because it constitutes a normed milieu in which behaviours and aptitudes have meaning with regard to a need.

Conceived of in this way, such centring refuses what scientific theory regards as being its reality and which is given in a single, univocal description. The plurality of living beings immediately attests to the plurality of worlds, if by world one understands the site of meaning, such that around a centre it is related to norms. Hence there is what must be called a conflict of absolutes which is precisely picked out in the famous text of 'Le Vivant et son milieu'.

First of all, Canguilhem absolutizes reality in the unified form that, at least ideally, physical science attributes to it:

> Strictly speaking, the status of reality applies only to the absolute universe, to the universal milieu of elements and movements established by science, the recognition of which as such is necessarily accompanied by the disqualification of *every* subjectively centred natural milieu, including that of man, as vital illusions or errors.
>
> (Canguilhem [1965]1980: 153)

In passing, we can see that centring is explicitly associated here with a subjective connotation. However, this is only in order to discredit this connotation by confronting it with the point of view of the absolute character of the scientifically determined universe.

However, this absolute character is immediately contrasted with another. For, Canguilhem says, 'the natural milieu of men is not situated in the universal

milieu like a content in its container. A centre is not resolved into its environment' (ibid.: 154). And, moving from centring to the effect of meaning, he affirms 'the inadequacy of any biology which, in surrendering completely to the spirit of the physico-chemical sciences, would eliminate from its domain any consideration of meaning' (ibid.: 154). Finally, tying the knot, Canguilhem passes from meaning to the norm to conclude: 'From the biological and psychological point of view, meaning is an assessment of value in relation to a need. And, for the one who experiences and lives it, a need is an irreducible, and thereby absolute, reference system' (ibid.: 154). The word 'absolute' is not there by chance. Canguilhem insists: 'There is a centre of reference that could be called absolute. The living being is, precisely, a centre of reference' (ibid.: 154). So it can be seen that the absolute character of the objective universal milieu is coupled with the absolute character of subjective need, the latter giving its energy to the triplet of centring, norm and meaning.

This conflict of absolutes implies that what is truly real, what determines differences within reality, varies from one whole to the other depending on the site from which one is speaking. With regard to the absolute universe, or universal milieu, living milieux have no meaning which would enable them to be classified or compared. As Canguilhem says, if one adopts the point of view of the in-itself then one has to say that 'the milieu of man's sensory and technical values possesses no more reality in itself than the natural milieu of the woodlouse or grey squirrel' (ibid.: 153).

On the other hand, everything changes if one is placed within the presubjective configuration of centring, norm and meaning, that is if one is a woodlouse, grey squirrel or a human being. With regard to the absolute character of need, the absolute reality of the universal milieu is an indifferent antinature. The Moderns know this; they have given up the harmony of these two absolutes. Canguilhem praises Fontenelle precisely for having been the author who was able to give an amusing twist to what was 'an absurd and depressing idea in the eyes of the Ancients, that of a Humanity without destiny in a limitless Universe.' I would add: it is precisely for this reason that, in an exemplary fashion, the concept of the subject is a modern concept; it picks out the conflict of absolutes.

But there is a further, supplementary twist to the complication. It would be too simple to oppose the absolute character of the universal milieu to the presubjective absolute character of living centring. For its part, the human subject is entailed in both terms of the conflict. As the subject of science, through mathematics, experiment and technique, it constitutes the absolute real universe from which every centre is absent. As a living subject, through the changeable singularity of its centred, normed and meaningful natural milieu, it objects to this universe. Henceforth, the notion of a 'subject' somehow designates not just *one* of the terms of the clash of absolutes, but rather the enigma of this discordance itself.

It is precisely the status of the knowing subject in the life sciences that brings this enigma into sharp relief. Is the knowing subject an instance of the scientific subject, attached to the decentred universe, or of the living subject who produces norms which are always centred by an absolute need? Almost all of Canguilhem's

texts are motivated by this question. Certainly he comes to maintain that the subject of the life sciences is precisely the point at which this conflict of absolutes is brought to bear.

On the one hand, Canguilhem repeats that the living being is the original condition of any science of life. The formula expressed in the 'Introduction' to *La Connaisance de la vie* is well known: 'The thought of the living must take from the living the very idea of the living' (Canguilhem [1965]1980: 13). This is taken further with the observation that to do mathematics it is enough to be an angel, but that to do biology 'sometimes we need to experience ourselves as dumb animals' (ibid.). It is because we share in the presubjective singularity of centring that the living offers itself to knowledge. It is this that, in contrast to the object of physics, makes the living resistant to any transcendental constitution. More generally, as Canguilhem says in 'Le Concept et la vie', as soon as the living is taken into account there is 'a resistance of the thing, not to knowledge, but to a theory of knowledge which proceeds from knowledge to the thing' (Canguilhem 1968). Now to proceed on the basis of the thing is to place oneself on the ground of its absolute character and so on the basis of centring and meaning. Canguilhem never gives way on this point, and in 'The question of normality in the history of biological thought' he claims that always: 'Questions about the vital meaning of these norms, though not directly matters of chemistry and physics, are questions of biology' (Canguilhem 1988: 144). In this precise sense biology necessarily has a subjective dimension.

However, on the other hand, insofar as it is subject to the scientific ideal, biology shares in a break with the centring and singularity of the milieu. It connects up with the 'neutrality' governing the concepts of the universal milieu. It is therefore also a-subjective. Certainly science is a normed activity, or, as Canguilhem says in 'L'Object de l'histoire des sciences', an 'axiological' activity which, he adds, is called 'the search for truth' (Canguilhem 1994: 30). But does this 'search for truth' arise from the absolute character of the living being's need? Is the norm governing the search for truth an extension of the vital norms which centre the subject of need? This could only be established within the framework of a doctrine of the subject, so that we seem be caught on a wheel.

Ultimately it would seem that science, and indeed, more generally, the human action it informs, cannot be understood within the strict natural framework proposed by the knot of centring, norm and meaning. With reference to a text by Adam Smith on polytheist religions, Canguilhem pays tribute to 'the unostentatious profundity of the observation that man is only led to forge the supernatural to the extent that, within nature, his actions constitute a counter-nature'. Does this mean that the subject, or at least the human subject, is the being which, in the supernatural illusion, goes beyond the counter-nature of its action? In any event, we must no doubt remember here that the subject of biological knowledge is concerned with the discordance between its scientific procedures and its object, nature and counter-nature and, finally, between absolutes. In this the subject of biological knowledge is reducible neither to the living being nor to the scientist.

This means also, and here I evoke the second great discontinuity where the word subject is called upon in some way, that this subject is neither technical nor scientific. Canguilhem, in a line of descent from Bergson, likes to present technique as a continuation of the effect of vital norms, whereas science goes beyond the limits of centring. It is in this sense that, in 'Machine et organisme', he writes: 'The solution we have tried to defend has the advantage of showing man in continuity with life through technique before insisting on the break for which he assumes responsibility with science' (Canguilhem [1965]1980: 127). Thus, at the point we have now reached, I would suggest that the subject is the empty term for the articulation of a natural continuity and a counter-natural discontinuity, itself cast within the complex of technique and science, and in which a conflict of absolutes is realized.

The consideration of medicine comes to saturate or complicate once again this provisional statement. If there is one theme that is particularly constant in Canguilhem's work, it is the irreducibility of medicine to what within it is due to effective science. In 1951, he declared forcefully that 'the medico-surgical act is not a scientific act, since the sick man, who trusts his doctor's conscience more than he does his science, is not only a physiological problem to be resolved, but above all a distress to be relieved'. In 1978 there is an overwhelming recourse to subjective connotations:

> The sick person is a Subject capable of expression who recognizes himself as a Subject in all that he can only designate in terms of possession: his pain and his representation of it, his anxiety, his hopes and his dreams. While on the part of rationality these possessions will be identified as so many illusions, nevertheless the authentic nature of the power of illusion must be acknowledged. It is objective to acknowledge that the power of illusion is not the capacity of an object. . . . The subjectivity of the sick person's lived experience cannot be nullified in the objectivity of medical knowledge. . . . This protest of existence deserves to be listened to, even if it opposes to the rationality of a well-founded judgement the limit of a sort of ceiling that cannot be pierced.

In the first text, the distress invoked amounts to the fact of subjective centring being ineluctably given within the field in which the doctor works. In the second text, the subject is a being with the capacity for illusion through which he or she eludes any process of pure objectification. The capacity for illusion and error is the decisive test of the subject here. It brings to mind the phrase used by Canguilhem when commenting on the doctrine of fetishism in Comte: 'In the beginning was Fiction.' What begins in the world of fiction is the resistance of the human subject to the destruction of the absolute character of his centring. On its own account, and not just through its knowledge (*savoir*), medicine must be able to enter into a dialogue with the fiction in which the subject expresses this resistance.

Finally, the theme of the subject weaves a triple negative determination:

- Centring, which is an absolute of the living being, blocks the objective laying out of an absolute universe.
- Meaning, which passes through the supposition of norms, blocks the realization of a biology completely reduced to the physico-chemical.
- Fiction, finally, blocks an approach to the living being's distress through pure knowledge.

This negative egology could be transcribed in a reformulation of Bichat's famous definition of life, frequently cited by Canguilhem. We will then say: 'The subject is the set of functions which resist objectification.' But immediately we must add that there is nothing ineffable in this. In Canguilhem's eyes, there clearly exists a discipline of thought which seizes on these functions of resistance. This discipline is philosophy.

The question then becomes: from what preferential philosophical angle does Canguilhem approach this theme of the subject that is only indicated in outline by epistemology and history?

With respect to the subject of knowledge, or the subject of science, the best starting point seems to me to be found in a very terse and complex text in which Canguilhem broaches the reservations, or the questions, that certain developments in Bachelard provoke in him. Here are some essential fragments of this text:

> Bachelard continues to employ a psychological vocabulary to set out an axiological type of rationalism. . . . The divided Subject whose structure he presents is only divided because it is an axiological Subject. 'Every value divides the evaluating subject.' Now, if the concepts of normative psyche and normative psychology are admissible, do we not have a surprising subject given the subject of a 'psychologism of normalisation'? . . . In any case, we will not deny Bachelard's total lucidity concerning the difficulty of constituting the vocabulary of a rationalist epistemology from top to bottom without reference to an ontology of reason or without reference to a transcendental theory of categories.

Canguilhem firmly maintains, albeit against Bachelard, that the doctrine of the subject which upholds the objectivity of science cannot be a psychological doctrine. Canguilhem has continued to maintain this anti-psychologist axiom with basically the same vigour as Husserl before him, although for completely different reasons. It seems to him that Bachelard does not sufficiently extricate himself from an improved psychologism when he addresses the crucial question of norms.

It is clear, even so, that a transcendental type of solution will not do for Canguilhem either. It is all the less fitting for him in that modern biology seems to him to confirm one of his oldest intuitions: in the knowledge of life, the a prioris do not exist on the side of the subject but on that of the object or the thing. That the living prescribes the thought of the living is explicitly opposed to the

assumption of a transcendental subject when Canguilhem writes in 'Le Concept et la vie': 'It is not because I am a subject, in the transcendental sense of the word, but because I am living that I must look for the reference of life within life itself.' And, commenting on the discovery of the genetic code, a veritable logos inscribed within the chemical combinatorial, he concludes: 'To define life as a meaning inscribed in matter is to acknowledge the existence of an objective *a priori* that is inherently material and not merely formal' (Canguilhem 1994: 317, translation modified). Hence it can be seen that meaning itself, the major category of subjective centring, works against the hypothesis of a transcendental subject.

Canguilhem finally seems also to reject a subject drawn from what he calls an ontology of reason, be this a subject detached from the site of the Ideas, as in Plato, or one coextensive with a thinking thing, as in Descartes. There is nothing surprising in this, since such subjects, instead of dealing with the conflict of absolutes, tend to force the union of the centred subject and the absolute character of the universe, which bars their way to an adequate conception of the living being.

If it is neither psychological, nor transcendental, nor substantial, what then can this subject, the entire visible effect of which is subtractive or a resistance to objectification, be positively? It seems to me that Canguilhem, with the philosophical discretion that was for him like an ethic of speech, suggests two tracks.

In the text on Galileo, Canguilhem takes up the trial of the scientist and concludes by absolving him. Why? Because, according to him, in the absence of realizable proofs of his hypotheses, Galileo was right to invoke the infinite future of their validation. We have in this a crucial dimension of the subject of knowledge – its historicity. As soon as the singular position of such a subject has been got under way, it naturally considers itself to be infinite both in its rule and its effects. I cite: 'In his human existence, Galileo took upon himself an infinite task of measurement and the co-ordination of experiments which requires the time of humanity as infinite subject of knowledge' (Canguilhem 1968).

If the subject of science can take up simultaneously the two conflicting absolutes of his living centring and the neutral ideal of the universal milieu, it is because in both singular cases he can be represented as captive to an infinite task. This task works, precisely, in the gap between the two absolutes. The singularity of the living being is taken up and relayed through the infinite history of the consequence of his thoughts and actions. 'Humanity' is thus the generic name of every singular living subject, insofar as this subject is situated within the history of truths.

The other track concerns the nature of the task itself as pursued on the assumption of an infinite subject of knowledge. Here we find what I think is, next to that of the question of the centre, perhaps the most important of Canguilhem's concepts, that of movement (*déplacement*). The most extended text concerning this concept is the following, taken from 'Le Concept et la vie':

> [Man] makes mistakes when he chooses the wrong spot for receiving the kind of information he is after. But he also gathers information by moving around

> (*se déplacer*), and by moving objects around, with the aid of various kinds of technology . . . moving things around and changing the relations among objects. Knowledge, then, is an anxious quest for the greatest possible quantity and variety of information. If the *a priori* is in things, if the concept is in life, then to be a subject of knowledge is simply to be dissatisfied with the meaning one finds ready at hand. Subjectivity is therefore nothing other than dissatisfaction. Perhaps that is what life is. Interpreted in a certain way, contemporary biology is, somehow, a philosophy of life.
>
> (Canguilhem 1994: 319)

We can see that movement, which, just before this passage, Canguilhem calls human errancy, is what is presumed of free subjectivity in the principle of all knowledge, including error. This freedom looms up as dissatisfaction with a meaning. It is the living energy which invests truth as a journey. For a truth is obtained in a constant change of situations, a movement that, in my own terms, I have called the regime of investigations. And it is on this route of investigations, or, for Canguilhem, in the freedom of movements, that successive truths work.

I do not use the word freedom lightly. In the article on the normal and the pathological, Canguilhem states: 'As far as the human psyche is concerned, the norm is the demand for and use of freedom as capacity to revise and institute norms, a demand which normally implies the risk of madness' (Canguilhem [1965]1980: 168). Now the obligatory method of this capacity to revise norms is movement, so the use of freedom is ultimately governed by the rules which authorize or limit the direction taken by the possible and by experiments.

It is certainly not without interest that, for Canguilhem, the allegation of 'madness' can under no circumstances be an acceptable reason for strictly pinning down everything which moves or wishes to move about. Truth is at stake.

Fundamentally, movement remains an activity of the living being, since it always develops from within the normative centring, or carries with it the requirement of a shift of the centre, which is also a shift of meaning. But the infinity of movements also approximates to the absolute decentred reality, precisely because, besides the living subject and through the living subject, it assumes a subject free to move about, that is to say an historicized subject in the true sense of the term. And, in turn, such a subject does not renounce fiction. On the contrary, for, as Canguilhem writes in 'On the history of the life sciences since Darwin':

> The imaginary (*fictive*) construction of a possible development is not intended to deprive the past of its reality. On the contrary, it highlights its true historical nature and clarifies the responsibility of individuals, whether scientists or politicians; it purifies history by demonstrating that the historical record was in no sense dictated by Fate.
>
> (Canguilhem 1988: 112–13 translation modified)

Finally, then, the subject is three things: in the name of humanity, it subjects singularity to the infinite becoming of truths; in the name of science, it creates a

breach in the neutral plenitude of the universe through the natural dissatisfaction of the living being; and, in the name of fiction, it avoids the temptation of the inevitable. This cognitive and fictitious humanity is first and above all freedom of movement, the freedom to come and go.

My conclusion is that there is a subject for Canguilhem only insofar as we can say that in the universe there exists a living being that, dissatisfied with meaning and fitted for moving the configurations of its objectivity, always appears, in the order of life and in the ambiguity of the adjective, as a somewhat *displaced* (*déplacé*) living being.

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Notes

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1 No page references are provided by the author in the French original, and sometimes there is no reference for the text being cited. Where possible these have been supplied by the translator.

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