Rethinking the norm of Life Beyond Biopolitics. Towards an Ethical Framework

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RETHINKING THE NORM OF LIFE BEYOND BIOPOLITICS. TOWARDS AN ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the qualification of forms of life in approaches of biopolitics and vitalism, two main perspectives that map discussions around the politics of life in contemporary political theorising. The literature on biopolitics highlights how modes of life are given meaning as effect of regimes of power that construct the value ascribed to forms of living. The idea of a norm of life captures the functioning of biopolitical apparatuses that operate through logics of inclusion and exclusion of forms of life, by rearticulating the ancient Greek distinction between *zoe* and *bios*. Opposite to biopolitics, vitalism looks at life in its materiality and attempts to re-ground the value ascribed to forms of living in an ontological dimension that starts from the assumption of a power intrinsic to life as the principle to inform also the laws of the social and political domain. Even though formulating an apparently opposite account to biopolitics, the thesis argues that perspectives of vitalism entail an idea of life that reproduces qualifications and exclusions in drawing out their political projects. By so doing, they are unable to reframe the terms of the debate of the politics of life in a way that fundamentally challenges the premises of biopolitics.

After providing a schematic of this debate, the thesis elaborates an alternative perspective that, following the trajectory of the engagement with life that runs through the works of Michel Foucault, Georges Canguilhem and contemporary Spinozist perspectives, argues that a more comprehensive account of the ways in which power and life relate to each other cannot be captured by either a discursive or a materialist account only and needs to be seen as dependent on the contingent situations in which the engagement and encounter with modes of life are defined. By critically deploying William Connolly's notion of ontopolitics, the argument maintains that this approach, which fosters a practical ethics of life, remains open and receptive to modes of life and their interaction with multiple levels of power. To this aim, the analysis formulates an ethical approach that conceives of modes of existence not as object of a discursive power over life only nor as a purely vital-materialist power of life, but treats modes of life in their singularity.

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Statement of Authorship

I hereby confirm that this thesis is the product of my own work. All sources used are referenced.

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Sara Raimondi
London, September 2018

Introduction

Mapping the Debate on the Politics of Life

> "Today politics knows no value (and consequently no nonvalue) other than life"
>
> (Agamben, 1998: 10)

> "Forming concepts is a way of living and not a way of killing life, it is a way to live in relative mobility and not a way to immobilise life; it is to show, among those billions of living beings that inform their environment and inform themselves on the basis of it, an innovation that can be judged as one likes, tiny or substantial: a very special type of information"
>
> (Foucault, 2003: 14-15)

The question around politics and life

At the roots of this thesis, there is a preoccupation with current understandings of a politics of life. As the above quote by the Italian theorist Giorgio Agamben suggests, an engagement with "life" has become a defining element for politics. Key issues that populate the political debate, both in academic discussions and in public discourse, seem to show this trend: from contemporary asylum and refugee policies, to medical research and its bioethical implications, from agriculture policies and animal studies to debates inspired by posthumanist and neo-materialist sensitivities asking what kinds of life should enter into the political domain. Even though being very diverse and spanning a vast array of areas and disciplinary subjects, all these issues seem to be driven by the underlying question of what counts as life and what the value attributed to life is. The question of the engagement with modes of life applies both to practices and gestures in everyday interactions and to policy decisions at governmental level. In all these cases, a more or less established idea of what is understood by "life" seems to be challenged and put into question by new encounters and understandings, which refashion the problematic of what qualifies as life in a new way.

This concern has not been ignored by academic debates. In particular, two main approaches have engaged in discussions around the politics of life: biopolitics and vitalism. On the one hand, biopolitics looks at life as politically at stake and takes the biological dimension of life of subjects and individuals as the key interest of political control. Notably starting with the work of Michel Foucault (1978), biopolitics stands today as an episteme (Vatter, 2009)[1] that has acquired a preeminent status in political and cross-disciplinary theorising, spanning both empirical and theoretical approaches across social sciences, economics, anthropology and legal studies, passing through arts, medicine and biology (Lemke, 2011; Wilmer and Zukauskaite, 2015).

On the other hand, vitalism puts forth an affective-phenomenological understanding of life derived from the philosophy of affectivity, process and self-organisation inspired by the thoughts of Baruch Spinoza, Henri Bergson and, more recently, Gilles Deleuze. Vitalism emphasises ideas of becoming over being, of action over structure, of flow and flux over fixity and stasis (Fraser et al, 2005; Lash, 2006). Even though originally applied to the biological sciences, in social studies this approach tends to be used to define rationalities, explanations and ethical understandings that conceive of the material and/or human world through a non-reductionist perspective (Blencowe, 2011: 204). Referring to Michel Foucault's quote reported above, vitalism conceives of life as fundamentally escaping any stable knowledge, and highlights the self-regulating and self-assessing capacities that pertain to all modes of living. Together, biopolitics and vitalism provide two main perspectives in which the question around the politics of life can be captured and mapped out today (Thacker, 2010).

This thesis is interested in the understandings of life within these perspectives. It establishes that biopolitics entails an idea of life subjected to processes of normalisation and classification effected by mechanisms of power. This implies the disqualification and exclusion of certain modes of existence from the political domain. The enquiry then asks whether vitalism, with its allegedly more comprehensive account of life, can provide an answer to the exclusions and normalisation seen operating in biopolitics. After giving a negative answer to this second question, the

[1] As Vatter (2009) notices, the status of biopolitics within current academic debates and in political and social theorising more specifically can be best captured by another term used by Foucault in his *Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Foucault, 2002): more than a clearly identifiable approach, biopolitics may be defined as an "episteme", an "order of things" which does not function as a paradigm but stands as an incessant source of paradigms (Foucault, 2002). The variety and diversity of avenues of research that biopolitics has generated across many disciplinary fields is also what makes it difficult, if not impossible, to pin the term down to a clearly identifiable definition.

research sets out to formulate an alternative account of the politics of life, which strives for a more situated and context-dependent engagement with modes of being and encounter of life at the level of everyday practices.

Biopolitics and vitalism: a contested relationship

If the approaches just introduced provide important frameworks in contemporary political theorising, their understanding and mutual relationship appear more contested and blurred. The existent literature on the subject tends to treat the two as neatly separate approaches and sees them as incapable of establishing a reciprocal dialogue. In his book *After Life* (2010), Eugene Thacker identifies vitalism and biopolitics as two "major modes in the politico-philosophical engagement with 'life' today" (2010, xiii–xiv)[2] and emphasises the conceptual difference and historical distinction that has been highlighted above. In a similar fashion, Zukauskaite and Wilmer, in their work *Resisting Biopolitics: Philosophical, Political and Performative Strategies* (2013), define them as three sub-strands within the current biopolitical debate: a forensic strand, concerned with questions of sovereignty, theology and the law, which they identify primarily with Agamben (himself building on the previous work of Foucault and Carl Schmitt); the stand of political economy, represented particularly by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and the strand of vitalism, once again derived from the line of Spinoza-Deleuze and concerned with the power of "life itself". Although with very different premises and outcomes, they all build on Foucault's suggestion that at a certain point in time, "it was life more than the law that became the issue of political struggles" (Foucault, 1998:145). In the latter strand, life particularly comes to be regarded as a vital, more-than-human material force (Marks, 1998), which emerges across living beings and that has further inspired current strands of new materialist and posthumanist literature (Coole and Frost, 2010; Braidotti, 2013).

Finally, Thomas Lemke (2005, 2015) equally suggests a classification of the works that have taken on and updated the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics and

[2] Thacker adds a third perspective to this outline, identified with the politico-theological account of life that ushers in particular from the work of Heidegger and Derrida, and takes a starting point of transcendence. The reasons why this project focuses particularly on the two approaches mentioned above will become fully clear in the rest of the introduction, when I further unpack the problematic that is at the very root of this thesis, that is, the engagement with the situated and contingent engagement with modes of living and the potential exclusions ensuing from current accounts of the politics of life. In this regard, biopolitics and vitalism appear the two most productive approaches that help formulate, and only partially address, the question posed. This is the reason for selecting them as the starting point of the analysis. It should also be noticed that my analysis distances itself from the objectives and the skeptical conclusions that Thacker advances around the very engagement with the idea of life as philosophical concern (Thacker, 2010: x).

developed it in further directions. The different lines of reception that he lists are the following: first, the literature that draws from Gilles Deleuze's and Donna Haraway's works, which challenges the idea of disciplinary control and values the material corporeal dimension of the body as site of politically significant action (as represented today in further perspectives of affectivity or material-embodied feminism, Haraway, 1988; McLaren, 2012). A second perspective takes a genealogical stance by showing the origin of biopolitics both in the West (Agamben's work on ancient Greece, 1998) and beyond the Western hemisphere in post-colonial contexts, as made evident by the work of Achille Mbembe (2001). Finally, a third area of enquiry again focuses on the mode of the political intertwined with capitalist logics through the work of Hardt and Negri (2000, 2005) and, to an extent, Roberto Esposito (2007, 2013). Lemke also adds another development that looks at the matter of life as relevant for both science and technology studies and for feminist and gender theories: this coincides with the corporeal and technological dimension of existence as object of appropriation by power; the empirically-driven works of Nikolas Rose and Paul Rabinow (2003, 2006) exemplify this last position.

In addition, a similar contrast between the two perspectives can be found within the literature that shapes these debates themselves. For instance, Braidotti (2013) reads and criticises the work on biopolitics derived from Foucault's legacy. She openly declares the intention of challenging

> the idea of the biopolitical on both conceptual and political grounds. The current conditions of advanced capitalism push the logic of the biopolitical beyond anthropocentrism and pay renewed attention to the necropolitical dimensions of the politics of 'Life' (Braidotti, 2015: 71).

In particular, her polemical object is the "forensic" biopolitics exemplified by Agamben (1998, 2005), who produces a tanathopolitics by focusing on a conception of life (as "bare" life) captured in the inhuman status of extreme vulnerability, bordering and exception. In her view, this approach ontologicises the relation between politics and violence in taking mortality and finitude as the transhistorical horizon of discussions on "life". She concludes that, if it is true that Agamben (and other authors in the biopolitical strand) raises a concern about life, this is accomplished only in a negative definition, where life is portrayed as fundamentally diminished and inhumane under the effect of power (Braidotti, 2013). Braidotti, thus, criticises the attention

given to the element of death, which ends up reifying an immanent conception of life and deprives it of its intrinsic vital force.

A final case that demonstrates the confused and blurred theorisation of the relationship existing between these two bodies of literature, finally, applies to the existing collections around biopolitics. Some of the main existent anthologies on biopolitics (Campbell and Sitze, 2013, Prozorov and Rentea, 2016; Radomska, 2016) often gather together texts and authors that belong to all the approaches listed above. However, the rationale behind this move remains silenced or almost entirely undertheorised. From this preliminary survey, it appears clear that variations within vitalist and biopolitical perspectives are often easily interpreted as contrasting and opposite positions.

If this division appears established and commonly accepted, however, much less work has been done in problematising this understanding (Szerszynski, 2005). This project sets out to contribute to this gap and, first, provides a schematic that maps out the debate in a novel way. More specifically, by using the concept of ontopolitical interpretation drawn from William Connolly (1992), which I will further explain in the section on methodology below, the thesis highlights that the two perspectives function as sets of presumptions that ground specific modes of qualifying life and forms of engagement with modes of living. The two perspectives can be situated along an axis that illustrates how power interacts with modes of living by varying from forms of complete control (what can be defined as a power *over* life) to forms where it is instead the force of life that defines the possibilities for political action (a pure power *of* life).

By following the assumptions around ontopolitics and by critically applying the concept as a method of analysis, the thesis examines the implications of the two perspectives and the forms of action and engagement with life that they enable to formulate. In this regard, the thesis advances the claim that vitalism is not able to provide an alternative to the normalisation and qualification of modes of life highlighted by biopolitics. Part I provides a schematic of the debate around the politics of life, before moving on and attempting to elaborate a different trajectory in the following parts of the thesis. It suggests that a more fruitful account of the politics of life should be understood as an attempt to consider the situatedness and the specificity of modes of engagement with life. This approach is more receptive towards the emergence of forms of life that escape established categories and reflects the immediate and contingent way in which relations with life are constantly negotiated.

The origin of the question: defining biopolitics

The analysis starts from the perspective of biopolitics as the first approach that systematically captures the question of the relationship between politics and life. It is thus necessary to provide a definition of this approach and explain why it is relevant for the enquiry set out by the project.

Tracing the origin of the biopolitical debate is a challenging task. Campbell and Sitze capture the difficulty of defining biopolitics by noticing that "competing versions, not only of the origins of biopolitics, but also of the question of its principal subject and object, will continue to spark debates, transatlantic and transpacific exchanges, and struggles for conceptual dominance" before they can find a fundamental agreement (Campbell and Sitze, 2013). Following from this, they conclude that the task for today's scholarship on biopolitics is not so much seeking to impose a dominant or overarching definition, but rather to "dramatize biopolitics as the expression of a kind of predicament involving the intersection, or perhaps reciprocal incorporation, of life and politics, the two concepts that together spell *biopolitics*" (Campbell and Sitze, 2013).

While appreciating the richness of debates associated with this term, it can be uncontestably recognised that the work of Michel Foucault provides a crucial turning point in raising the question of the political control of life. In this regard, I agree with Lemke's suggestion (2011) that, even though attempts to explain the relationship between politics and life were already present before then, it is only with Foucault that this perspective is invested with a new theoretical significance. Lemke effectively discusses how the debate was shaped before the intervention of Foucault. He identifies two particular strands: a "politicist" position, for which the very function of politics and the political consists of steering life processes of the population; and a "naturalist" position, which reads political processes in analogy with biological notions (for instance, in an organicist conception of the state). As Lemke most effectively demonstrates, both approaches ended up reifying one of the polarities considered (either politics or biological life) and subsuming the explanation of one domain to the functioning of the other in purely causal and deterministic terms (Lemke, 2012: 9-32).

On the backdrop of these more rigid accounts, it could be argued that Foucault is the first author that offers an analysis of biopolitics which does not consist simply of the mere reification of the two terms constituting the basis for the concept: life and

politics. Rather, in his own definition and study, the two terms are redefined and shown to be *mutually constitutive*. More specifically, the contribution that Foucault undeniably gives to the debate of biopolitics is to invert the very question from which biopolitics ushers: not so much enquiring into the ways in which characteristics and definitional elements of the one term (either life or politics) can be causally related to the other - that is, either subsuming politics to the functioning of biological laws or conceiving biological characteristics of the population as defining the kind of politics that can derive. Rather, for the first time, Foucault demonstrates how the relationship between the two is itself contestable and open, and is constantly redefined and reconstructed as effect of political action (Lemke, 2011, 4; 33-52).

My concern here is not so much going back to the discussion and clarification of early approaches, which have already been so effectively explained by Lemke. Rather, the aim of the thesis is to build on these conclusions and further problematise the way in which multiple perspectives around life and politics can be assessed and interpreted after Foucault's legacy. Following from this, the aim of the thesis is to offer an alternative account of the qualification of modes of life beyond the normalisation operated by biopolitical logics, which is the object of analysis in Chapter 1, and that is seen reproduced in vitalism (Chapter 2). The study takes as guiding definition of biopolitics those positions which demonstrate the contingent character of the boundary between natural and political life - which the definition of life as *zoe-bios* in Aristotle (1995) arguably brought to light (Agamben, 1998).

Contrary to approaches that reify the two terms and treat them as separate domains, the analysis here agrees with arguments that such boundary is continuously constructed. In this regard, it locates the origin of the biopolitical debate understood in these terms with the work of Foucault. Foucault is the first who demonstrates how the domain of natural life is appropriated by power by means of the establishment of systems of power-knowledge (Foucault, 1972, 1978), which aim precisely at gaining control over the natural dimension of life with the end of managing, directing, manipulating it. Foucault links the rise of these political mechanisms with the advent of political modernity. First, therefore, Foucault establishes a new definition of biopolitics as the processes whereby life has become the object-target of specific techniques and technologies of power. In particular, in Foucault himself, biopolitics is defined as a mode of power based on the attempt to take control of life in general "with the body as one pole and the population as the other" (Foucault, 2003: 253), referring

to the two regimes of disciplinary and biopolitical power that he elaborates on in the intermediate phase of his work.

However, as the thesis will demonstrate, Foucault's account does not stop at the analysis of how life becomes the object of mechanisms of political control. Rather, Foucault's specific formulation of biopolitics already presupposes an understanding of life also as active and productive, and capable of interacting with power dynamics in a more fluid and complex way. I will substantiate this claim in Part II of the thesis and use it to open up an alternative trajectory to the mapping of the debate on the politics of life established in Chapters 1 and 2. This alternative route looks at a way to account for the practical engagement and encounter with modes of living beyond the qualifications established by either biopolitics or vitalism. It invites to consider the specificity and situatedness of the engagement with life at the level of everyday relationships. The argument put forth here maintains that a politics of life so understood presupposes an ethical approach to life that can accommodate such situatedness. As an alternative to the ideas of life fully identified with either a power over or a power of, the thesis suggests a treatment of life as singularity and maintains that an appreciation of the latter can be conveyed by means of an ethics that enables diverse and not pre-determined forms of political relationships.

The engagement with life: concepts, issues, problems

The survey of biopolitical and vitalist perspectives conducted above requires looking at some key problematics that the debate around the politics of life raises, both in terms of the key concepts and ideas discussed and of the way in which they are treated and understood in the thesis with regard to existent approaches on the subject-matter. These provide the key dimensions that will be explored and investigated in the development of the enquiry.

The idea of life and the understanding of biopolitics

It is first necessary to clarify what is meant by life in the thesis and particularly in relation to politics. In the previous sections, I indicated how my analysis positions – and, simultaneously, distinguishes itself from – the large body of critical literature that currently engages with approaches of biopolitics and vitalism. The thesis looks at the qualification of life within these debates and starts from biopolitics to set out the

problem of the normalisation of forms of life, which often results in potentially exclusionary terms in the politics derived. An effective formulation to frame the understanding of life in the literature on biopolitics can be captured by Roberto Esposito's definition of the "enigma of biopolitics". In his work *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2007), and crucially in the first chapter titled "The Enigma of Biopolitics", the author clearly defines biopolitics by noticing that "notwithstanding the theorisation of the reciprocal implication […] politics and life remain indefinite in profile and qualification" (Esposito, 2006: 43). It is worth reporting at length a core passage that explicates what is meant here by life:

> If we want to remain with the Greek (and particularly with the Aristotelian) lexicon, biopolitics refers, if anything, to the dimension of *zoe*, which is to say to life in its simple biological capacity [*tenuta*], more than it does to *bios*, understood as "qualified life", or "form of life", or at least to the line of conjunction along which bios is exposed to *zoe*, naturalising bios as well. But precisely with regard to this terminological exchange, the idea of biopolitics appears to be situated in a zone of double indiscernibility, first because it is inhabited by a term that does not belong to it and indeed risks distorting it. And then because it is fixed by a concept, precisely that of *zoe*, which is stripped from every formal connotation. *Zoe* itself can only be defined problematically: what, assuming it is even conceivable, is an absolutely natural life? […] Politics penetrates directly in life and life becomes other from itself. Thus, if natural life doesn't exist, that isn't at the same time technological as well; if the relation between *bios* and *zoe* needs by now (or has always needed) to include in it a third correlated term, *techne* – then how do we hypothesize an exclusive relation between politics and life? (Esposito, 2013: 351).

The very "enigma" of biopolitics is identified in the complex articulation of the relationship between politics and life, one that, as the author states, by definition cannot find any correct and final answer[3]. A clarification needs to be added in regard to the dichotomy of *bios-zoe,* which Esposito's excerpt uses. I will provide a full discussion of the terms, their contested genealogy and the way in which they help set out the starting selection of the literature on biopolitics in Chapter 1. On the one hand,

[3] As evident from the quote, Esposito identifies a third term that pertains to the problem of defining the relationship between politics and life, that of *techne*. Although supporting this reading, the analysis conducted in this thesis will leave this third term in the background. This is primarily due to the scope of the discussion: the incorporation of this third term would open up new avenues of enquiry which a single project could hardly be able to address (in particular, it would require a closer focus on the work of other contemporary authors that develop specifically this line of enquiry, see for instance Deleuze, 1992b; the aforementioned work by Haraway, 1988; to certain extent, Braidotti, 2013). The focus is here put on the relationship between politics and life specifically, reflecting the question of how to rethink life beyond the normalising processes entailed by biopolitics and as the common object of concern that links biopolitics and vitalism. In this regard, the relationship between *bios-zoe* provides the preliminary framework for the discussion which will be expanded in Chapter 1.

bios stands for the qualification of the organised form of life that pertains to a political community. Its origin alludes to the idea of politics as a specific domain aimed at attending the question of "how to live" (Aristotle, 1995). On the other hand, *zoe* points at the natural, unappropriated biological dimension that falls outside the political domain[4]. However, according to Esposito, *zoe* also stands as something that cannot be defined but "problematically", indicating the complex and undecidable way in which its relationship with politics can be articulated.

In regard to the latter point, it has been argued (Piasentier, 2018) that the ambiguity and complex relationship highlighted by Esposito rely on a deeper unresolved analytical problem that emerges already in Foucault. Addressing this point is useful to further clarify my engagement with the original theorisation of Foucault in Chapter 3. Piasentier argues that this ambiguity lies on the fact that a distinction between a natural and a politically-defined life is not clearly and fully established in Foucault's original theory of biopolitics itself (Foucault, 1979, 1982). Hence, he concludes that Foucault himself simultaneously implied two approaches in his answering the problem of the relation between politics and life, deriving from two different theories of the human being: a discursive (where life is conceived as object of political control) and a vitalist, referring to the intrinsic capacities present in biological life (Piasentier, 2018: 22). This observation is important for the analysis conducted here since, in my enquiry towards an alternative approach to the qualification of life in Part II, I support a similar argument and maintain that, in fact, a vital and material element is presupposed in Foucault's theory of possibilities of resistance to power structures.

Moreover, the latter point around the ambiguous and ambivalent meaning that the discussion of life has in Foucault is supported by another argument. Both Lemke (2010) and Fassin (2010) have claimed that the concept of "life" itself remains fundamentally under-theorised in Foucault, who, in his lectures on biopolitics, very soon shifts from the attention on life to that of the population, thus paving the way to his theories around governmentality, with which his theory of biopolitics is often conflated. This further distinction helps me justify my engagement with the theory of biopolitics and the trajectory of enquiry I select. I intimate that, perhaps contrary to the direction in which the work of Foucault has been often taken on by studies focusing

[4] As it will be discussed further on, different authors have different perspectives as to how, and at what point in time, *zoe* starts problematising the logics and domain of politics.

on questions of governmentality, maintaining an analytical distinction between governmentality and biopolitics is important and productive, in order to unlock problematics that concern each of the two terms of analysis. In particular, I argue that the concern for the qualification of life can be more fully addressed by looking specifically at the biopolitical dimension of Foucault's theorising. This justifies the reason why I engage with this specific part of Foucault's work and I leave aside instead the many developments ushered from academic debates on governmentality (Burchell, 1991; Lemke, 2001, 2010).

In relation to this, I share Fassin's invitation to deepen the enquiry into the "politics of life" initiated by Foucault and investigate the concept of life, that, even though undertheorised, sits at the core of the question and problematic of biopolitics. I agree with Fassin (2009) that shifting the focus from governmentality to the analysis of life as such is important particularly for two main reasons. First, it demonstrates that biopolitics, as a form of a politics of life, is concerned not only with the question of governmentality and technologies, but also of meaning and values that are attached to life and produced by its management and qualification. Secondly, what is at stake in a deeper enquiry into the idea of life is an understanding of the degree of legitimacy attached to forms of life and the way in which they are included and accounted for both in everyday engagements and in the political realm. Both these dimensions will be central to the following analysis.

Finally, there is a last point that I want to touch on to further support the relevance and the purpose of the analysis conducted by the thesis. Fassin advances a similar point in another piece (2010), where he argues that there are in fact two different ways to understand life within the account of politics started by Foucault: an idea of life as *matter*, which values life as existence and looks primarily at its biological and scientific consideration, and a life as *meaning*, which is instead attached a moral aim and that refers to the social-political dimension of life (in a trajectory that can be seen influenced particularly by Hannah Arendt). My research aims to make an intervention on this aspect, too: it argues that the two dimensions of life do not need to be disjoined, since, as it shall be seen, the material and biological status of existence often plays a role in determining the exclusions, inequalities and injustices of which life is object at the social and political level. The concept of singularity, that I will introduce in the second part of the thesis in order to build an alternative account to the politics of life,

aims at taking into consideration these only apparently separate dimensions which are highlighted in academic discussions around life as an object of interest for politics.

Politics, ethics and norms

The introductory debate to the problematic of the thesis is framed as an engagement with current perspectives on the politics of life, starting from the biopolitical idea that life becomes the primary concern for politics. This formulation, thus, requires a clarification as to what is understood by politics here and what is the relationship of the politics of life with other perspectives of political theorising. As Lemke (2011) very clearly notices, it could be argued that the very definition of biopolitics as a mode of governing which is concerned with the organisation and the control of life may sound trivial or obvious, and it might be argued that *any* politics deals with life by definition. In this regard, the very juxtaposition of the two terms "life" and "politics" may appear an oxymoron (Lemke, 2011: 2).

However, as will become clear in the development of the analysis, the perspectives of the politics of life analysed could also be read as *inverting* the ordinary logics of politics. In this regard, biopolitics in particular is contrasted with a "classical" definition (as Lemke, 2011 defines it) whereby the task of politics is identified with creating a space for "common action and decision-making and is exactly what transcends the necessities of bodily experience and biological facts and opens up the realms of freedom and human interaction" (Lemke, 2011: 2). Politics, in this second reading, stands therefore as a separate and artificial domain for the construction of collective meaning, from which the functioning and fulfilments of material and biological needs should be kept at bay and abstracted into formal structures of institutions and laws. This is for instance the idea of politics famously advocated by Arendt, which I will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 1.

On similar lines, Vatter (2006) notices that Foucault's work, for the first time, groundbreakingly demonstrates that biopolitics marks the shift of the operation of politics to a power imposed over life achieved through the control of processes of *life itself*. Whereas the mere preservation of biological life was seen as a condition for enabling political existence (as a structured and well-defined way of life as *bios*), the idea of "mere living" or life itself becomes now the very end of politics. By taking this approach, a qualitative difference is thus established between biopolitics and understandings of politics as a separate and artificial sphere of human interaction.

The latter point, thus, helps clarify what is meant by politics in the analysis, and particularly in the perspective of an ethics of life that I elaborate in Part II of the thesis. I will return to this clarification in Chapter 5, when discussing the idea of a dispositional ethics to which the approach formulated by the thesis is compared. It is here maintained that, precisely because biopolitics *already* displaces politics from the formal and separate sphere of institutions and juridical arrangements to the level of practices and norms of living that constitute and discursively define the life and experience of subjects, then politics, and also any response to (bio)politics, need to be performed in the "everyday and at the level of gestures, practices and bodies" (Beausoleil, 2017: 314).

This is also the reason why, as I will argue in Part II, the answer to the qualification of life in biopolitics needs to be investigated (and practiced) at the level of ethics. If, as Foucault demonstrates, the sphere of governing and practices is already shifted from the formal domain of codified laws to the processes taking place at the level of interactions and relations of power that constitute the fabric of society, then *any* response or challenge to the biopolitical structuring of life also need to take place at this same level of the everyday interactions and micro-political renegotiation of modes of living and existing, which is then able to influence and affect also the domain of formal and institutional politics. I will expand all these discussions in Chapter 5 when completing the final step of the argument and try to demonstrate how the ethics of life as singularity here elaborated can be made politically productive.

The question of ethics and ethical attitude as the dimension to alter the effects of power will thus be central to the analysis. I first introduce considerations around ethics when examining the productive idea of life that is implied in Foucault's notions of critique and resistance. In Foucault, the function of ethics that produces resistance is understood as *co-extensive* to biopolitics and, in my reading, is associated to the vital element of life that opposes and actively responds to biopolitical mechanisms.

The understanding of subjectivity and ethics is further connected to possibilities of action. To quote Thoma on this point: biopolitics defines "the borderland in which the distinction between life and action is introduced and dramatized in the first place" (Thoma in Lemke, 2011: 31). The question around possibilities of action that counter biopolitical strategies of regulation of life is another dimension to which the account provided by the thesis aims at giving a contribution. It is argued that, in order to reveal the complex modes of engagement with life, also with the aim of altering the

normalisation effected by power, the encounter with life needs to be problematised and decided at the level of actions and conducts. As seen with Esposito, the account of biopolitics cannot rely on an absolute and abstract idea of life, but needs to be played at the level of generating and enabling new forms of action. In the approaches of biopolitics discussed in Chapter 1, the space for subjective action is still subordinated to the mechanisms exercised by power. Nevertheless, with Foucault, possibilities for action start also to be associated with the capacity of the self to critically respond and position oneself with regard to power dynamics. Ethics will be there identified with the expression of a dimension of freedom that remains open for the self to challenge power relations (Foucault, 1978, 1983). The analysis of the idea of political *dispositif* that Foucault uses to characterise the working of power will be crucial to capture this dimension of the analysis (Deleuze, 1992c; Legg, 2011).

Moreover, the focus on ethics is further expanded in the following part of the discussion when looking at the ethics inspired by Spinoza's naturalist-material system as read through contemporary literature (Deleuze, 1988b; 1992a; Sharp, 2011; Spinoza, 1985). There, ethics appears entirely detached from systems of defined rules and principles and is read as part of the very experience of life. Therefore, the affective experience at the level of the material-corporeal dimension can generate new modes of thinking and thus forms of action that can have an impact on the surrounding environment and system of relations. At this point, ethics plays a crucial role, since it becomes the condition not only to respond to and resist forms of power, but also to transform the surrounding environment of ideas and conducts.

In relation to the latter point, another problem will be identified with the role of norms. Norms are read as the multiple devices through which biopolitical logics ascribe a qualification on life. More specifically, norms play the role of defining the boundary between the normal, the standard, the naturalised idea of modes of being and, conversely, what can be seen as the abnormal, the improper or deviant form of existence. The functioning of norms and rules effects mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion produced by biopolitics in its qualification of modes of life and structuring the regime of the living. If the idea of the shift from the juridical law to the norm is taken again from Foucault, and it will be more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 3, it is argued that the authors discussed in Chapter 1 all provide an articulation of biopolitical processes of normalisation. In the introduction of the problem of the thesis, I define norms as any biopolitical apparatus that establishes a qualification of types of life and

organises them around a certain normative idea of what legitimate life is. As the analysis progresses, I demonstrate how, first, the idea of normalisation of life starts to be challenged by Foucault and his idea of resistance. Then, by moving on to contemporary Spinozian understandings via Canguilhem, who introduces the idea of the capacity of life to generate its own norms, I will try to demonstrate how the affective disposition produced by systems of relations can have an impact on the surrounding environment of ideas and structures, with the possibility of modifying existent systems of thinking and modes of engagement with life. In the final stage, I will ask whether the approach of an ethics of life here developed can be integrated and have an effect also for formal and macro-scale political dynamics. As a parallel, even though minor, implication of the argument, I will also briefly touch on what the role of critique to power is and what its significance is in regard to the possibilities of action outlined.

Finally, an aspect on which I will focus attention is the ontological starting point of immanence that the two approaches of biopolitics and vitalism seem to share. In both accounts, life is produced as effect of an immanent causality (Macherey, 1992; Juniper and Jose, 2008), whereby processes of control by power and the ensuing formation of subjects are not seen as separate or standing on different planes (as it would occur under assumptions of transcendence), but are simultaneously present and continuously produce one another. This argument is thus relevant because it focuses on a purely immanent dimension of life, and discusses the value attributed to it at the level of experiences and practices. This is another element that allows me to put biopolitics in relation and communication to theories of naturalisation of life in vitalism.

Chapter outline

The section above has outlined some of the main topics and problematics that the discussion of the politics of life dealt with by the thesis analyses. It is now possible to present how these themes will be structured in the project and the rationale of the chapter outline.

Chapter 1 discusses how the qualification of life in approaches of biopolitics is interpreted and developed by some key authors within this perspective. The analysis demonstrates that the literature selected shows that, under biopolitical logic, life is

subject to processes of normalisation that assess and qualify types of life, and organise them in specific categories. This differentiation will be formulated by a rehabilitation of the dichotomy *bios* and *zoe*. These expressions are borrowed from the classical terminology used to define "life" in the ancient Greek language and referring respectively to the politically organised form of existence (*bios*), which is counter posed to the natural and biological dimension of living (*zoe*). The thinkers discussed at this preliminary stage are authors who, even though implicitly, build their analysis of biopolitics upon the starting divide of *bios-zoe*. The thinkers considered in the first chapter are: Hannah Arendt, by looking at the emergence of the sphere of the social as the domain of the "governing of life"; Giorgio Agamben and his focus on the relationship between sovereignty and bare life; Roberto Esposito through the logics of the *immunitas-communitas* generating the modern category of personhood, and the joined work of Nikolas Rose and Paul Rabinow, who are instead preoccupied with the treatment of the life of individuals and the population under the effect of medical practices. The literature discussed in the chapter highlights how biopolitics functions through operations of classification of forms of life between normal and legitimate and those that are instead deprived of any value and consideration. By so doing, biopolitics thus operates continuous processes of inclusions and exclusions which structure the regime of the living. Even though appreciating the critical outlook of these perspectives, the analysis intimates that their idea of life does not allow them to recognise or explain phenomena of life that might escape the control and appropriation by power, that means, of a consideration of life outside biopolitical discursive logics.

Chapter 2 shifts the focus on the other perspective that takes issue with the politics of life in contemporary debates: positions of vitalism. These are here taken as the opposite end in understandings of the politics of life, by focusing on the element of the productive and lively life as *zoe*. By postulating a generative and expansive force of life, these perspectives seem to potentially rethink the qualification and value of life beyond the constraints and normalising operations of biopolitics. I first try to outline the main constitutive elements pertaining to the idea of life maintained by vitalist approaches. Even though with differentiations among theories and sub-fields, life is there described as endowed of enabling, productive and lively capacities. This pertains to a living force that furthers itself by flowing into an interconnected whole across all planetary scales and registers of existence and variously defined as "zoe", life-force or "biophilosophy" (Thaker, 2015; Zukauskaite, 2015; Bradotti, 2013, 2015; Bennett,

2010). I discuss this point on the backdrop of a "vitalist turn" in the social sciences in the last decades, which tends to questions modern ad discursive modes of knowledge-formation and experience. I then analyse some examples of this approach by selecting the following: the theory of Gaia and the living planet; the new-materialist idea of thing-power and lively matter; and the call for an eco-sophy of zoe-cented egalitarianism formulated particularly by Braidotti. While appreciating their attempt to take a more egalitarian and flat ontology of life, I argue that in their political projects, the discourses analysed are not able to overcome the classifications of life found in biopolitics, even though reformulating this in an inverted order (that means, starting from the celebration of natural forms of life). By critically deploying an approach of ontopolitics, I argue that the ontological assumptions underpinning their claims reproduce a normative idea of life that impacts on the political projects that they advocate. Together, Chapter 1 and 2 propose a schematic in which the debate of approaches revolving around the question of the politics of life can be read in contemporary theory.

Then, Part II of the analysis turns to the elaboration of an alternative perspective to the one found in those analysed in the previous enquiry. It is aimed at investigating modes of qualification and engagement with life that escape the exclusions and reductions operated by processes of normalisation; this is the question that leads the enquiry. In Chapter 3, I explore this route by returning to the theory of Michel Foucault (1978, 1998). A comprehensive reading of the author's work, in fact, demonstrates that Foucault entailed a more complex and nuanced idea of life. If he is the first to theorise the working of norms and processes of normalisation in modern politics (as shift from a paradigm centred around the sovereign and the law), he also provides an opening beyond such an outcome. The structures that Foucault envisions for the shaping of subjectivity in biopolitical regimes seem already to accommodate an element of a vital life, which is not excluded or entirely suppressed by biopolitical mechanisms of power. This is identified with the enactment of practices of resistance enabled by an ethics understood as "care for the self". In order to prove this point, I concentrate on the concept of the *dispositif* as the notion that chiefly identifies the structure according to which multiple dynamics of power are present in the process of subject-formation and articulate the possible field of experience, thus defining the norm of possible modes of life. Ultimately, the subject develops an art "not to be governed quite so much" (Foucault, 1996: 384) by means of practices of resistance

and critique. For Foucault, this attitude carves the space for subjective freedom within the structures of biopolitical normalisation. Foucault's theory, thus, has the merit of starting to blur the distinction between a power over and a power of life and demonstrates how the two are (and need to be) already intertwined in the working of biopolitical practices. A vital element that expresses this force of life affirming itself beyond power constraints will be further characterised as a capacity of norm-formation by linking Foucault's work to that of Georges Canguilhem. The latter helps introduce the idea of a striving for life that generates its norms and escapes power.

Chapter 4, thus, attempts to further build on the point reached and asks how it is possible to expand the generative force of life found in Foucault not only in a way that resists power dynamics, but also such as it is able to produce transformation and modification of the surrounding environment. In this aim, the analysis looks at the materialist-naturalism of Spinoza's thought through the way it has been taken on by contemporary theorising. It intimates that contemporary readings of Spinoza's materialist conception of thought, particularly through the interpretation offered by Deleuze, indicate a way to challenge and, potentially, change, existent systems of relations, in which also the experience and practices of biopolitics take place. The distinctive element of this understanding is read through the connection between the bodily-affective experience and the dimension of thought. Experience generates modification of ways of thinking in the self and subjects that are translated into action. In this way, it expands the attempt initiated by Foucault through his ideas of resistance and critique. More specifically, the ethics inspired by Spinoza and highlighted in some of contemporary Spinozism (as in authors like Hasana Sharp) does not oppose existent systems of power relations, but rather is able to modify the surrounding environment of ideas, since ideas themselves, generated by the continuity with affective experience, can have a material force to be turned into action. If Foucault's work attempted to introduce a positive critique by practices of resistance played at the level of the body, then, the integration and passage to a Spinozian ethics expands the biopolitical experience to forms of actions able to modify their surrounding environment of relations and systems of thinking. There, the argument suggests an expansion of Foucault's concept of *dispositifs* with the idea of an ecology (or an ecosystem) of thought. In the latter, ideas hold a material force that is able to modify the surrounding system of relations, by engaging in a process of transformation that can ultimately carve new spaces for alternative forms and modes of life to emerge. Ultimately, the

analysis explores how conceiving of *dispositifs* as a materialist ecosystem of thought can generate practices of counter-conduct within a "milieu" of norms and their functioning - and eventually open up the possibility for their modification. Here, ethics comes to play a crucial role, as a constant practice or mode of living able to modify existent norms and challenge existent ways of thinking. In this regard, I suggest the idea of an "ethics of singularity" as a form of ethics able to support the attempt to challenge and renegotiate existent systems of norms and biopolitical accounts of life by means of practices of counter-conducts. The idea of singularity offers a different ground for a politics of life able to incorporate an account of life that is not reduced either to the object of a power exercised over it nor to a pure affirmation of a force of life. Rather, it appears able to renegotiate the value ascribed to life and modes of living in the contingent and situated mode of engagement in which the encounter with forms of life takes place. This is seen to challenge the systems of normalisation and qualifications of life discussed in Part I. In order to exemplify how the ethics of singularity here outlined can work in practice, I will provide a brief example by applying the analysis to discussions around refugees.

Finally, Chapter 5 tries to address some points that still seem to remain open from the previous elaboration and anticipate the criticisms that could be advanced against the understanding of ethics outlined. These can be primarily identified with the overlooking of questions of power and domination, which were in fact central in the debate set out through biopolitical theories at the beginning of the thesis, and with the relevance and impact this has for formal and macro-structures of processes and phenomena at the political and institutional level. First, I will connect my analysis to discussions around a dispositional ethics (with which the approach I formulate share some commonalities) present in contemporary political theorising. This short discussion will help me clarify further the meaning of politics presupposed by the analysis and the impact that the ethics so formulated can have. I will finally turn to the work by William Connolly, which appears useful to address the problematics listed above: first, reengaging with the question of power by looking at a perspective of micro-politics; secondly, showing how ideas, actions and practices at the level of everyday relationships can have an impact also at the formal, macro-scale level of political practice.

Ultimately, the thesis maintains that the ethical perspective here elaborated can provide a non-reductionist account of modes of engagement and qualification of life

grounded on the appreciation of the contingent and situated character in which life is encountered. By so doing, it can provide a more comprehensive account – and thus, a practice - of a politics of life that the literature explored in Part I of the thesis is not able to address.

Ethics and norms between Foucault and Spinoza

I have outlined in the introductory section that the project is framed primarily as a contribution to the debates around the politics of life and takes biopolitics and vitalisms as points of departure. However, the selection of the literature and thinkers performed by the research contributes to a further area of scholarship, that is, the critical literature that deals with Foucault and Spinozist perspectives jointly. A quick survey of the existent scholarship on the subject can be offered.

First, it might be interesting to notice that, in his wide and most diverse body of work, Foucault himself engages and makes explicit reference to Spinoza only in two cases: first, with a very short mention in the *History of Madness* (2013) and in a more obscure reference during a televised debate with Noam Chomsky in 1971 around the idea of human nature (eventually collected in Chomsky and Foucault, 2011). The latter makes a rather vague allusion to the virtual political weight of Spinoza's ideas – possibly with reference to the notion of the multitude and a constituent power generated by the mobilisation of affects. Among the two, however, it is possibly the former that has more relevance for my analysis. The passage alludes to the function of reason in relation to action, which, crucially, is deemed to take place in the space of ethics (Foucault, 2006). Although this reference, too, remains rather short and under-explained by Foucault, it seems to allude to the fundamental Spinozian thesis of the connection of mind and nature, and of ideas and their surrounding environment, which does not leave any solution of continuity between ideas and action – and therefore, which makes any action *already* a matter of ethics. I will return and further expand on these theorisations only at a later stage of the analysis in Chapter 4. However, I maintain that this demonstrates that there is scope for a possible connection around the themes of action, ideas and ethics, on which the two perspectives seem to share significant commonality.

Beyond Foucault's direct mention, the first reference that comes to mind when thinking of the relation between biopolitics and Spinoza's vitalism cannot but be

identified with the series of works by Hardt and Negri (2000, 2005, 2011, 2017) and Deleuze (1988a, 1990, 1992a, 1994, 2001) and Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 2004, 2014). The former, in particular, recuperate the Spinozian concept of the "multitude" (Spinoza, 2004) to theorise the emergence of a new political subject staging plural forms of resistance against the global capitalist order in the form of the empire. On the other hand, Deleuze builds instead on the idea of desire to theorise rhizomatic and self-organising forms of action constantly renewing forms of de/territorialisation against the territorialising force of the state. Jointly, they celebrate the emancipatory invocation of the essence of life as force for staging action aimed at liberation from power. While recognising the value of these perspectives, my analysis runs a different direction of enquiry in posing the question of the norm and life. In doing so, I agree with Osborne (2016) that the originality and interest of vitalist perspectives (especially as interlocutors to biopolitics) can be focused on the question of the normativity of life and the living organism rather than on the recent invocations of a generalised, processual variety of vitalism largely deployed in the social sciences and humanities. Part of the originality of the enquiry, thus relies in selecting a trajectory into ideas of vitalism that runs through the work of Foucault and Georges Canguilhem (1973) to current Spinozism rather than on the idea of process, creativity and unbounded liveliness of the vitalisms[5]. This line is deemed more relevant for the question asked by the thesis. Nevertheless, I will still draw from Deleuze and further approaches in today's Spinozism (Sharp, 2011) as mediation to my reading of Spinoza and to the concepts introduced, in order to highlight the key themes that can be retraced in the contemporary turn to Spinoza.

A further branch of literature that broadly engages with the two thinkers (even though mainly indirectly or more loosely) is represented by those authors that, similarly to Deleuze, were deeply influenced by Spinoza's system of thinking and inevitably reflected Spinozian ideas in their own discussions with Foucault in the broader context of French and continental philosophy of the second half of the 20th century – and often recognising themselves in the wave of Marxian or post-Marxian thinkers. Authors like Althusser (2006; also in Montag, 1995), Balibar (1998) or Negri (1991, 2013) could be included in this second trajectory.

[5] For a further criticism of the approaches to vitalism focusing on creativity, vitality and self-organising processes applicable to both the biological and the social sphere see also Noys (2010, 2011); Prozorov (2007).

Moving towards more recent works, contributions to this debate remain rather scarce. Among these most recent works, Juniper and Jose (2008) have produced an article that clearly and lucidly traces a comparison between the immanent systems developed by the two authors, their convergence on the idea of an immanent causality and the way in which this impacts on processes of subject formation - in fact, a process that both of them envision as necessarily *decentering* the subject. I will use part of this contribution in the analysis.

A second piece has been written more recently by Dawney (2013). The title of the article "The Interruption: Investigating Subjectivation and Affect" once again puts the emphasis on the revaluation of the affective experience and the role of the body in attending processes of subjectivation. In particular, the author is interested in the social dimension of affects and the way in which the mobilisation of affective and bodily experience intersects with political processes of manipulations of affects. Once again, this will be an important point of comparison for the analysis that follows; however, I will also take a separate angle from Dawney by looking at the way in which ethics enables an engagement with life.

A separate piece which also focuses on the affective dimension, applied specifically to spirituality and practices of the self, is Davidson (2015). It interestingly discusses how, in defining technologies of cultivation of the self, a relevant precursor of Foucault's interest on the subject should be identified with Spinoza and his attention to ethics and spiritual experience, more than with Descartes. The article thus deals specifically with the topic of the formation of ethical subjectivity. Once again, even though interesting and ultimately in line with the argument I suggest in this regard, the analysis remains very different and partly outside the focus of my study[6].

Above all these possible references, a particular mention needs to be reserved to Pierre Macherey and to the few articles and essays that he has written by explicitly connecting the two authors (and collected primarily in his *In a Materialist Way* (1998), see particularly the essay "Towards a Natural History of Norms"). Significantly for my analysis, Macherey traces a point of comparison and continuity between the two authors precisely in regard to the idea of the norm and immanence, and the effects this entails for processes of subject-formation and social theory more broadly. I will not go

[6] First, it focuses on the individual and practices of the self, while my investigation has an ethical and philosophical angle. Secondly, it does not engage with questions of life and politics, which is instead the area from where my research starts. I thus draw from the piece only insofar as some of the claims made intersect with the objectives of my analysis.

on too deep commenting on Macherey's work here, since his work has indeed been key for the development of some of the thoughts underpinning the project, and it will be thus incorporated along the analysis.

Methodology: ontopolitics and projectional interpretation

A final remark can be added with regard to the methodology used to conduct the research. This is inherent primarily to the question posed by the thesis, which is framed through approaches of the politics of life and, primarily, biopolitics. In this regard, it appears necessary to justify my reading of this debate. As mentioned, current approaches of biopolitics span a vast range of perspectives and fields, which can hardly be constrained into any final classification. One of the reasons behind the wide variety of discussions gathered under this label is that biopolitics has increasingly grown as a framework that is applied both to theoretical and empirical discussions and often at the edges of well-defined disciplinary boundaries[7]. The current project understands this difficulty and by no means aims at reducing the discussion to a single line of reading that claims any final answer. In this regard, I agree with what Lemke points out when he highlights that no contributions to the field can claim to be neutral and no research on the subject can be entirely value-free. To quote him:

> Each answer to the question of what processes and structures, what rationalities and technologies, what epochs and historical eras could be called "biopolitical" is always and inevitably the result of a selective perspective. In this respect, each definition of biopolitics must sharpen its analytical and critical profile against the blind spots and weak points of competing suggestions (Lemke, 2011: 2-3).

My intervention aims at providing an alternative reading to the treatment of the qualification of life diagnosed by the literature on biopolitics here selected, starting from the rehabilitation of the *zoe-bios* dichotomy. The analysis does not claim any ultimate and definitive justification; rather, it builds on the "blind spots and weak points" identified in the existent scholarship and provides a contribution aiming to address these gaps, and thus move the discussion further.

Moreover, such contribution can be supported by another perspective that appeared particularly helpful in defining the method to approach the literature here

[7] In this regard, the definition and study provided here, concerned with the philosophical dimension of biopolitical approaches, clearly differs from perspectives emphasising the empirical or historical application of the term. See for instance Marks (2006, 2008).

selected and identifying and addressing possible gaps. This has been found in William Connolly's formulation of the idea of "ontopolitics", and the practice of projectional interpretation associated with it. Projectional interpretation inspired by an ontopolitical analysis consists in bringing to the surface the ontological presumptions that inform interpretations of actuality (in the case of the thesis, current understandings of the politics of life) and demonstrates how these presumptions affect the politics derived, and the exclusions and limitations ensuing from it. Projectional interpretation as a method, therefore, goes beyond attempts to simply deconstruct the claims of the positions engaged (by unveiling the idea of rationality that they presuppose) or to conduct a genealogical enquiry tracing their historical origin. It rather compares existing perspectives on the basis of their underpinning ontological understandings and shows how these affect their respective accounts of politics. By so doing, it demonstrates the contestable character of perspectives that are often not sufficiently questioned, and thus opens up space for new alternatives to be advanced.

It is possible to discuss these notions and how they can be applied to the specific case of my analysis in more detail. Connolly first coins the term of ontopolitics in the essay "The Irony of Interpretation" (1992), in order to analyse the "ontopolitical matrix of late-modern discourse", in reference to the debate of the Anglo-American political theory of the early 1990s. With this, he organises the main perspectives existent in the debate in political theory of that period along two axes: a horizontal axis defined by the variable of the relationship between society and nature (varying from the pole of mastery to that of attunement and harmony) and a vertical one capturing the level of application, from the primacy of the individual to the collective dimension of the community or the state. By so doing, he maps out the perspectives that shaped the existent debate in political theory at the time, and provides the criteria to structure and organise the debate and compare the different positions gathered in it. My analysis is not concerned with the specific content and context engaged by Connolly in the 1990s. Yet, I suggest that undertaking an ontopolitical interpretation may provide a fruitful method for organising and structuring the debate of the politics of life from which my research departs, and for creating the space for new interventions starting from the gaps and limits found in it. These steps – that is, critically assessing existent perspectives of the politics of life and opening up an alternative interpretation – will be explored in Part I and Part II of the thesis respectively.

First, the concept of ontopolitics helps demonstrates that every political interpretation and every political statement implies a specific ontology, even when the latter is not visible and tends to be concealed behind the operations of the most ordinary conflicts, problems and issues that face contemporary life. Connolly goes on specifying that any type of political interpretation is already onto-political since

> it contains fundamental presumptions that establish the possibilities within which its assessment of actuality is presented, delimits its distribution of explanatory elements, generates parameters within which its ethics is elaborated, and centers (or decenters) its assessment of responsibility (Connolly, 1992: 119).

In what follows, I apply the method of ontopolitical analysis so described to survey and structure the debate on the politics of life outlined in Part I: more than a full matrix, I suggest that the perspectives of biopolitics and vitalism can be read as the opposite ends of the axis that maps out the contemporary debate on the politics of life. This helps organise existent perspectives as varying from those suggesting a power *over* life (biopolitics), where life is conceived as an object controlled and mastered by power, and those advocating a power *of* life (vitalism) where life is seen as continuously generative and self-organising and thus escaping any control.

Applying an ontopolitical analysis as a method, therefore, first, allows me to compare and critically assess these competing positions and simultaneously show and identify affinities between their competing claims. As Connolly puts it, ontopolitics enables a "delineation and critique of affinities and complementarities among [these] competitors" (Connolly, 1992: 133). Also for my analysis, an ontopolitical method helps comparing and contrasting the perspectives of biopolitics and vitalism, by looking simultaneously at the level of the politics that they advocate and at how this is informed by the ontological assumptions from which their theories start. In this regard, I follow Connolly in arguing that the comprehension and analysis of any political position cannot but go hand in hand with the unveiling of the ontological and epistemological assumptions that support political claims in the first place. In this light, using the idea of ontopolitics as a method means first of all unpacking, recuperating and deconstructing the ontological assumptions underpinning the approaches of biopolitics and vitalism discussed, in order to better justify their normative stand about the meaning and function of politics and, crucially, about what entities partake in such politics. In better terms, ontopolitics helps define the problems

and possibilities of being that become seen, detected and analysed by a certain perspective and thus helps compare the positions analysed on this ground.

This approach appears particularly significant for my question around the qualification of life. The ontopolitical method helps me demonstrate that the two perspectives of biopolitics and vitalism are only apparently opposite in offering accounts of the politics of life. Starting from strong ontological positions, they both result in theorising a politics that remains still partial and limited as to the types and modes of engagement with life that they are able to conceive and conceptualise. Their mutual opposition (which, as seen in a previous section, is also corroborated by the secondary literature on the subject) structures the existent debate on the politics of life in a manner that still remains highly polarised: refusing the strong premises of one position implies immediately being drawn "like a magnet" (Rosenow & Coleman, 2016: 265) to the opposite pole of the axis. However, despite their declared differences, biopolitics and vitalism remain similar in seeing life as endowed of a certain purpose or directionality (either as object of a power *over*, or as capable of a generative power *of* life itself). A first problem that ontopolitics as method of analysis helps identify is thus how these alternatives tend to define themselves mutually. In other words, they polarise the understanding of the politics of life in a binary structure that is yet ultimately unable to reframe and reformulate the terms of the debate, and does not leave space for alternative understandings.

This structuring highlights thus a shortcoming of which the current debate remains prey. By starting from defined strong ontological conceptions of life and living beings, biopolitics and vitalisms are not able to grasp the practical engagement and encounters of modes of living and being that escape their premises. Thus, precisely at the limits of these approaches that an analysis along the lines of ontopolitics helps identify, it is possible to justify why ask the question of life in the first place. I argue that the relevance of this question, that drives the thesis, is found precisely in the "holes" that these theories leave open: they are unable to account for the material and contingent engagement with life and modes of living in everyday interactions. If these theories provide a most useful compass and tool to formulate and diagnose some key problems around questions of life and politics, yet, they are incapable of grasping the way in which in each relation and encounter, we constantly deal with modes of living,

assessing their values and determining how they count, in a way that comes before and escapes the premises that these approaches set out[8].

Moreover, and in connection to the last point, there is a further element of Connolly's approach that appears helpful to explain how I methodologically conduct the analysis in Part II and III of the thesis. The author further indicates genealogy of the origin of such positions and linguistic deconstruction of their claims as the possible methods to apply during the analysis. However, he also shows that neither of these may be considered sufficient, since they are still incapable of imagining an alternative beyond the space mapped by the matrix of existent positions (Connolly, 1992: 143). In order to overcome this impasse, he identifies an alternative trajectory in the method of "projectional interpretation" of options: this entails bringing to light explicitly ontological interpretations as possible competing understandings, thus opening up the matrix but also acknowledging the contestable character with which these alternatives must be considered. It is worth quoting at length the passage where this further notion is introduced. In Connolly, projectional interpretation

> proceeds by projecting ontological presumptions explicitly into detailed interpretations of actuality, acknowledging that its implicit projections surely exceed its explicit formulation of them and that its explicit formulation – constructed as relative to other identifiable positions – always exceeds its current capacity to demonstrate its truth. It challenges closure in the matrix, first, by affirming the contestable character of its own projections, second, by offering readings of particular features of contemporary life that compete with detailed accounts offered by others, and, third, by moving back and forth between these two levels as it introduces alternative interpretations onto the established field of the discourse (Connolly, 1992: 145).

The application of an ontolopolitical method based on projectional interpretation, thus, allows me to justify and explain also how I conduct the further development of the thesis. The unveiling of ontological underpinnings and their implications for political understandings help leave possible competing interpretations contestable, and thus add to and pluralise the terms of the established discourse. This is what I set up in Part II and III of the thesis, where, after having established the limits of the current debate around the politics of life, I suggest a possible alternative to make sense of modes of engagement with forms of being and living which remain excluded

[8] For further engagements and current deployment of the concept of ontopolitics, especially in relation to possibilities of academic discussion and critique see Chandler (2018); Rosenow & Coleman (2016); Campbell (2005); for an application and analysis of the implication of ontopolitics in debates in IR, see Dillon (1998).

from the positions analysed. Also the further trajectory outlined does not claim any final or superior validity, but rather aims at introducing alternative interpretations in the field of the debate, and invites further attempts in this direction. This is the contribution that the project pursues.

Ontopolitics, therefore, seems to provide a useful method to structure the enquiry in light of the question around the politics of life investigated by the project: it first helps map out and structure the literature of the existing debate, highlighting differences and affinities between the positions analysed but also the limits of the current terms of the discourse. Secondly, it situates and justifies my own intervention into the debate, which does not claim on itself any definitive answer, but attempts to open up further avenues of research around the question of politics and life in contemporary political theorising.

Part I | The Norm of (Bio)Political Life: A Schematic

Chapter 1
Biopolitics and the Power over Life

Introduction

The first chapter engages with the qualification of life in biopolitics. As outlined in the Introduction, biopolitics refers to perspectives that are concerned with the articulation of the relationship between power and life (Campbell and Sitze, 2013). As I pointed out, this grounding definition has been developed in many directions and has generated multiple and diverse strands of enquiry (economic, Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2005; forensic, Agamben, 2005; necropolitical, Mbembe, 2001; technological, Haraway, 1988, Deleuze, 1992b). All these perspectives offer a diagnosis of the biopolitical management of life, by which power establishes knowledge on forms of living, with the aim of regularising and controlling them. Thinkers within the biopolitical debate have highlighted how life and modes of being become object of a power exercised over them and of which life is defined as a passive object.

In this very broad range of readings, I followed Lemke's suggestion (2011) to return to the original analysis of Foucault. Lemke maintains that the ground-breaking contribution offered by Foucault is to demonstrate that natural and political domains of life do not exist objectively as already-defined, absolute spheres. Rather, the boundary between natural and political existence is constructed as effect of practices and discourses that power imposes on forms of living. This appeared evident also in the definition that Roberto Esposito (2013) has given of the "enigma" of biopolitics, pointing to the contingency and undecidability of the threshold between natural and political life.

Chapter 1 explores the implications of the discursive treatment of life highlighted by biopolitics. It aims to show that the fabrication of the boundary between natural and political existence produces a certain norm of life that classifies forms of existence between politically qualified life and forms that are deprived of political significance. By norm, I mean any biopolitical apparatus that establishes a qualification of types of life and organises them around a certain idea of what legitimate life is. Ensuing from

this, biopolitics operates through mechanisms of inclusion of certain forms of life and exclusion of those that are diminished or unworthy of political consideration. In order to develop this argument, the analysis returns to the distinction between natural and politically qualified life expressed in the *bios-zoe* dichotomy, which in the biopolitical literature still informs the classification of life as effect of regimes of power. The chapter focuses on contemporary theorists who have rehabilitated this distinction and have used it to develop a diagnosis of how biopolitical regimes operate through the qualification and construction of the value attributed to life, and the ensuing dynamics of inclusion/exclusion that derive from this classification. Far from being drawn from an idea of stable essence or identity of life and the living, the theories analysed demonstrate how the boundary between political and natural life results from the political action exercised along the continuum traced between *bios* and *zoe*. The dichotomy *bios-zoe*, therefore, can provide a fruitful analytical category to capture the working of biopolitics, by reducing life to an object which is defined by the control exercised over it, often with annihilating and potentially exclusionary effects.

I further substantiate the idea of a norm of life by specifying how mechanisms of biopolitical domination operate. They consist of processes of classification between forms of life that are considered legitimate, and thus inscribed in the political order, as opposed to other deemed "improper" or deviant, which remain outside of the capture and regularisation by regimes of knowledge-power. Biopolitical regimes produce not only a differentiation of forms of life, but also an attribution of value: modes of living are distributed along a continuum that separates the normal from the abnormal, the appropriate and regularised from what is excluded from the sphere of political life. The discursive character of power in the biopolitical qualification of life is one of the forms in which the politics of life can be currently understood.

The chapter is structured as follows: first, it unpacks the distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, its genealogy and argues for its analytical significance. Then, the following section looks at the works of Hannah Arendt, who provides a first example of a reading of the relationship between *zoe* and *bios* in her analysis of the emergence of the social and, even more, in intervening in the discussion of her contemporary experience of the post-WWII refugee crisis. Even though the inclusion of Arendt in this body of literature could be questioned[9], I argue that her treatment of the division between

[9] I acknowledge that the very inclusion of Arendt in this classification may be objected. However, the specific part of her work that I focus on and the way in which the analysis is structured and presented (that is, looking specifically

natural and political life, and particularly the way in which she applies it to the historical experience of refugees contemporary to her, justifies the inclusion of the author in this group. Then, the study proceeds with analysing the work of thinkers that look at the same problematic: Giorgio Agamben; the joined work of Nikolas Rose and Paul Rabinow, and Roberto Esposito. Expanding on a reading suggested by Zukaskaskite (2015)[10], I show how the authors above expose and together define a first paradigm within the life-politics schematic outlined in Part I of the thesis. Specifically, they demonstrate how biopolitical domination produces a qualification and normalisation of modes of life into sharp and mutually exclusionary categories: those of citizen and non-citizen (through the work of Arendt); of human and non-human (in Agamben); of healthy and pathological life (in Rose and Rabinow), of person and non-person (in the case of Esposito). Further distinctions may indeed be possible when taking a broader perspective on the biopolitical literature, especially when incorporating more contemporary developments and openings. This further expansion might include the following: living and non-living; animate and inanimate; organic and inorganic; healthy and disabled life; human and savage.

In sum, the chapter argues that the perspectives analysed offer a lucid and useful approach to diagnose how power operates over life through processes of normalisation, by producing a series of distinctions between those that are considered "appropriate" and "improper" modes of living. At the same time, however, this understanding also underplays phenomena intrinsic to life that might exceed and escape biopolitical classification and normalisation, and thus reduces also the possibility to challenge this division.

at her distinction between the political and the social sphere, or the sphere of labour, which reproduces the starting distinction between *zoe* and *bios* considered here) justifies the inclusion of Arendt in this literature. Moreover, there is extensive scholarship that provides a reading of Arendt as a biopolitical thinker (Lechte, 2007; Oksala, 2010; Vatter, 2006). Some of the claims made by this literature are taken into account to support the argument.

[10] Even though sharing some of the categories used by Zukaskaite, my analysis remains fundamentally different from hers. Zukaskaite is concerned with the idea of the subject and how the latter is produced in biopolitical discourses. I argue that approaching the discussion from the angle of life as the correlative to the exercise of biopolitical power provides a more useful framing to read biopolitics as a form of a politics of life and put it in dialogue with the approaches of vitalism discussed in Chapter 2. Jointly, this analysis offers a more comprehensive treatment of current perspectives on the politics of life; this is deemed relevant in order to account for the engagement with modes of life beyond the normalisation of biopolitics and its potentially exclusionary outcomes, which is the question posed by the research.

The conceptual foundations of biopolitics: Aristotle on the *zoe-bios* distinction

In his works on biology, ethics and politics, Aristotle sets out the foundations for talking about the idea of life in the theoretical edifice of Western thought. He refers to different kinds of life by deploying the terminology of *bios* and *zoe*. *Zoe* denotes those functions of a living being that correspond to bodily and corporeal processes (breathing, bodily heat…); on the contrary, *bios* tends to be conceived as a "way of life", and points to the insertion of being within a socio-political community and the thriving that comes from it. In political studies, the dichotomy has been popularised by the mediation offered by Giorgio Agamben, who starts the first work of his *Homo Sacer* series (1998) by deploying the terms and bringing them to new attention (1998, 2005). Agamben reinstates the distinction pointed out above between the natural functions and the political qualification of living beings and makes it the defining element of the very function of politics.

The etymological accuracy of the distinction has been object of increasing contestation (Finlayson, 2010; Hirono, 2016). These critics have advanced the claim that Agamben's study itself relies on the intervention made on the same topic by Arendt (2013) and Foucault (1972), and that this linguistic differentiation was in fact not present in the original Aristotle's texts. According to this criticism, Aristotle himself makes use of the word *bios* almost interchangeably between the two contexts: in a biological sense, when he studies biological phenomena of animals, and in the political sense, when referring to political and ethical qualities of mankind (for example, being courageous, honest…). Moreover, a clear distinction of *bios* from *zoe* seems not to be supported by the reading of original Greek works either (Hirono, 2016; Dubreuil et al., 2006). The same criticism has been also made clear by other authors, who tend to disregard this interpretation and argue for a much more blurred and less defined terminological use of the words in the classical world (Finlaynson, 2010; Swiffen, 2012).

Nevertheless, if the historical reliability of Agamben's analysis might be questioned, engaging with the discussion shows that the question around the encounter of politics and types of life can be traced back to a very early point in time. Derrida (2010), in a critical engagement with Agamben, seems to share this point. Derrida also rejects the idea that a clear *zoe-bios* distinction was in fact present in Aristotle's ancient texts. The point where this becomes the most evident is the very definition of man as

a "political animal", captured by the Greek expression of *politikon zoon*. With this definition, Aristotle seems already to challenge a clear divide between natural and politically organised modes of being and to imply an idea of *zoe* which is *already* political (Aristotle, 1995). His definition suggests that human *zoon* is political "by nature": being political is a natural attribute of human life and its specific difference from other animals. As Derrida comments on Aristotle: "Man is that living being who is taken by politics: he is a politically living being, and essentially so" (Derrida, 2010: 348). The definition of the human as *politikon zoon*, therefore, would seem to challenge the *zoe-bios* distinction on which Agamben founds his whole biopolitical edifice. Nevertheless, Derrida does not use this critique to refute Agamben's theory *tout court* and reverses it in order to argue that an obvious reference to biopolitics was already present in Aristotle (Derrida, 2010: 348). In this premises, therefore, biopolitics as the orchestration of *zoe-bios* could be deemed to initiate at very early stages of Western thought. The debate on *zoe-bios* can thus be used to define the beginning - if not empirical, at least, intellectual - of the very history of biopolitics. Therefore, if it is true, as Campbell and Sitze argue (2013), that it is in fact impossible to identify a clear and singular moment to mark the beginning of the theory of biopolitics, for the sake of the discussion that this thesis sets out, I take the reference to the qualification of life as *zoe-bios* as the starting analytical ground to select and classify the biopolitical literature considered at the preliminary stage of the analysis.

The specific angle that the chapter takes is to look at biopolitics as an operation of qualification of forms of life. By arguing along key thinkers that have uncovered the mode of functioning of biopolitical regimes, the chapter shows how the latter operate by structuring the regime of life (human life, and, more broadly also all life forms more generally) around categories that define the value and meaning assigned to living beings by the operation of political power. This corresponds to a process of normalisation that distinguishes between normal and abnormal or improper forms of living. This operation of power also decides about the inclusion of life into the political order. As the chapter demonstrates, as a consequence of this normalising operation, life becomes crystalised in a series of distinctions between legitimate and valued life as opposed to modes of existence which are excluded from the political domain. The chapter contends that a biopolitical mode of governing as emerging from the literature here selected is grounded on the distinction between types of life and the qualification and attribution of meaning and value that derives from it. In this regard, biopolitics is

built on an ontology of life which is assigned the status of mere object of biopolitical control. Such an account neutralises those phenomena intrinsic to life that might exceed and escape the boundaries of the determinations imposed by biopolitical domination, thus reducing also its potentials to escape the effects of power.

Hannah Arendt and the bio-politicisation of the public sphere

The beginning of biopolitics as an explicit area of research tends to be identified with the work of Michel Foucault (1978, 2002). Significantly, Foucault introduces the notion of biopolitics precisely by referring to the Aristotelian definition discussed above. To quote from the author: "for millennia, man remained what it was for Aristotle: a living being with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" (Foucault, 1978: 143). Foucault undeniably problematises the division outlined above, and, for the first time, he systematically deals with how the separation becomes challenged in the fabric of modern politics[11].

Despite this recognised starting point, it can be suggested that, before Foucault, the German thinker Hannah Arendt makes a move in a distinctive biopolitical direction, although with entirely different aims and premises. I suggest this reading by looking at Arendt's argument around the distinction between a political and a private/personal dimension of life (drawn from the ideas of *zoe* and *bios*), which she uses in the formulation of the rise of the social (Arendt, 2013). It is precisely the disruption of this divide, which she defines in highly critical terms, that marks the enlargement of the domain of the political to the governing of private life, or "life itself". I analyse this aspect of her thought to justify why, as I maintain, the author's work can be used to introduce the discussion of the approaches of biopolitics dealt with in the following[12]. I also suggest that, yet, if an engagement with the problematics

[11] A full discussion of Foucault's theory in this regard will be provided in Chapter 3. The reason for engaging with Foucault at a later stage of the analysis, as I will be arguing later in the thesis, is that Foucault's position in his treatment of the idea of "life" and the latter's interaction with politics is much more complex and nuanced and already contains elements that help overcome the definition and repressive outcomes of biopolitics outlined at this stage. I will thus look at Foucault in what follows, in order to pave the way to the opening towards ethics and a Spinozist system of ideas in the second part of the thesis.

[12] Several authors have supported a reading of Arendt's thought from a perspective of biopolitics (Collin, 1999; Durst, 2004; Vatter, 2006; Villa, 1996). They have specifically engaged with her discussion of "natality" as a category that looks at the relation between life and territorial sovereignty. I partly take an alternative trajectory and argue that a significant biopolitical framing can be traced already in Arendt's definition of the political as opposed to the social realm. I will nevertheless return to the question of sovereignty and its effects on the inclusion of modes of life in the next section when exemplifying the argument of the author through her discussion on refugees.

of biopolitics is present in this part of her work, it is in her treatment of the situation of the refugees that she witnessed and experienced in the aftermath of the second World War that the effects of biopolitical mechanisms on qualification and inclusion/exclusion of modes of life above described become even more apparent and explicit in her *oeuvre*. I start with the former aspect to contend that an engagement with the life-politics problematic - and with the relationship between politically organised life and the sphere of mere living - was in fact at the core of the author's philosophical enquiry.

In the first chapters of *The Human Condition* (2013), Arendt sets the basis of her political theory by looking at the space of politics within the dimensions of human life. Echoing the Aristotelian position discussed above, she establishes a neat distinction between the political public sphere (as the domain of life and freedom) and the private domain of the economy of the household, the *oikos* of personal affairs – of which she is ultimately highly critical (Arendt, 2013:106). The latter is identified with the dimension of labour pertaining to the fulfilment of biological and material needs of the natural dimension of human life. By compelling individuals to work incessantly to fulfil their needs, labour is seen a form of constraint and imprisonment.

Along with the physical dimension of living, yet, individuals partake also to the sphere of moral freedom, which stretches beyond the requirements of mere survival (Arendt, 2013:12). If labour is a condition of constraints, freedom needs to be realised in a separate, artificial domain of public life, which is the political sphere of action, words and deeds. With this theorisation, Arendt recovers the distinction between two kinds of life: a natural, biological dimension of existence, which equates humans to all other living beings in their never-ending struggle for survival (what can be termed as *zoe*), and an organised, defined life attached to their being part of a political community, in the world of *bios*. For her, only in the artificial sphere of politics can human beings realise themselves and establish a world of shared meaning and values through free action. The domain of politics is deemed a separate sphere of existence, additional and transcendent to the physiological and physical dimension of mere living.

Nevertheless, according to Arendt, a fundamental turn occurs in modern society when labour stops being considered as separate from the moral fulfilment in the political sphere of action, and becomes the organising principle of life also in the public sphere. She identifies this turn with the advent of the factory system and of

modern means of production, as the point in time when the division of labour transforms communities into societies of labourers (Arendt, 2013: 46). In these transformed historical and economic circumstances, the objective of political governance and administration coincides no longer with the cultivation of a separate human world, but rather with the expression and fulfilment of life itself and its material needs (Szerszynsky, 2005: 2). Arendt defines this transformation as the "unnatural rise of the natural" (Arendt, 2013: 47): the domain of natural life of material necessities irrupts into the separate and artificial human world of politics, dictating the criteria of its organisation. The domain of politics is no longer identified with a *polis* in which every individual can fulfil and express their human nature by means of speech and action. Rather, the public sphere becomes shaped by the logics of physical and practical necessity, and the organisation of life processes turns into the dominant rationale of political administration and management.

I argue that, by conceptualising the historical process of the rise of the social in terms of the irruption of the problematic of life itself, or natural life, in the organised world of politics, Arendt offers an account liable to an interpretation in biopolitical terms. Her theory illustrates the concern with the problem of the relation between politics and life as the constitutive element that defines politics. More specifically, Arendt endorses the idea that the definition of the political sphere consists in realising an artificial space aimed at the expression of human action, freedom and equality, carved out against the sphere of mere natural living and survival.

As I will illustrate in the rest of the chapter, however, contrarily to all the alternative perspectives on biopolitics that will be discussed in the following, the normative assessment of Arendt appears reversed. Whereas, as will become clear, authors in biopolitics tends to ascribe a negative character to the governing logics and the laws that define the entering of life *within* the political sphere (as operating a repression and often an annihilation of the free and natural sphere of existence), Arendt reverses this judgment and rather considers natural life as an obstacle and limit to the political realm of freedom. In this regard, Arendt's argument can be read as outlining a process of "animalisation" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983) of the domain of human living, that is at the core of the operation of biopolitics. However, whereas in the authors that follow, this process is seen as the result of the operation of a (bio)political power that obtains control on natural life, in Arendt, it is life itself that enters the logics of political existence, hindering and limiting the freedom that can be there

accomplished. Arendt's judgment of this process as "unnatural" thus, ensues from her celebration of the political sphere as the sole realm that can fulfil the condition of *zoon politikon* inherited from the Aristotelian tradition. To quote the author in a different passage drawn from *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, the entering of the natural life of *zoe* in the logics of governing is assessed as follows:

> the dark background of mere givenness, the background formed by our unchangeable and unique nature, breaks into the political scene as the alien which in its all too obvious difference reminds us of the limitations of human activity—which are identical with the limitations of human equality (Arendt, 1973: 301).

The natural life of "mere giveness", identifiable as *zoe,* is the threshold against which political life defines its limit. Thus, in the progressive "biopoliticisation" of the public sphere, it is now life processes (and not the creation of an artificial space for action and expression) that become the primary stake for political life. For the sake of the analysis here, two implications of what was just illustrated can be pointed out. First, as seen, Arendt uses the distinction of *zoe* and *bios* to articulate a clear division between the natural and the political spheres of existence. In this regard, she follows a historical perspective which sees the rise of biopolitics (conceived as the emergence of natural life as the main objective of governing) as a *modern* form of politics specifically[13]. In this case, biopolitics consists of the management, by means of organisation and normalisation, of the sets of conducts and behaviours that subjects exercise in the public sphere. Secondly, this incorporation redefines also subjects' relation to life, by bringing to the foreground the natural and material dimension of needs before the artificial one made up of values and meanings collectively constructed. The former corresponds to a form of life understood as *zoe* and driven primarily by the fulfilment of material necessities.

In Arendt, therefore, a biopolitical regime is conceived as an alteration of the relationship envisioned between natural and material life and politics. Her analysis highlights how the two become progressively intertwined: the laws of the private sphere of the *oikos* and labour infiltrate the public sphere of collective action. This shows the gradual problematisation of politics by life itself, which functions as the

[13] In fact, Arendt's analysis achieves here its closest proximity with the conclusions reached by Foucault on similar dynamics, and particularly in situating biopolitics historically. I will expand on Foucault in Chapter 3. In both the authors, it is possible to trace an analogy that sees the rise of modern political rationale as the shift from a visible, delimited and artifactual space of politics towards the progressive appropriation of all other domains of life; politics becomes thus equated to the administration of life processes. For a more accurate comparison between Foucault and Arendt on their approach to biopolitics see also Blencowe (2010, 2012); Allen (2002).

correlative to political life. For this reason, the work of Arendt, in this assessment of the emergence of the natural life in forging and determining the dynamics for collective existence, can be read as a precursor of the arguments that would later be fully formulated by approaches of biopolitics, even though with a reversed normative assessment by the author.

Bios-zoe in the citizen/non-citizen distinction

If the analysis of the "rise of the natural" just discussed makes it possible to link Arendt's work to the questions posed by biopolitics as the blurring and irrupting of life itself into the sphere of politics and governing, there is yet another aspect of Arendt's thought that lends itself to an analysis from a biopolitical perspective. This further development not only highlights the presence of the life-politics problematic in Arendt, but also unveils the consequences of the operation of classification of life highlighted by biopolitics. By separating a natural from a politically organised mode of living, biopolitical mechanisms function though a continuous inclusion of certain types of life within the recognised sphere of politics and the exclusion of those that remain external to it. In other words, the notions of *bios* and *zoe* also signal an operation of qualification and attribution of the value assigned to life, by distinguishing among politically qualified life and life that remains relegated to the mere sphere of natural needs in *zoe*. This is part of a process of normalisation, whereby biopolitical mechanisms regularise, administer and foster types of life and produce a classification, often also in totalising and exclusionary terms.

This distinction becomes apparent in Arendt's analysis of the establishment of totalitarian regimes, where she seems to exemplify the complex (and potentially deadly) working of such binary logics. In this regard, she demonstrates how the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century operated precisely by enacting a suppression and annihilation of the human element thorough a simultaneous process of de-humanisation and *bestialisation* of human beings, aimed at achieving a complete control over the biological dimension of life[14]. The fully human character attenable only thorough associative political life is reduced to a status of "naked living", deprived of any human dignity (Arendt, 1973).

[14] Vatter (2006) has argued that Arendt's use of the distinction outlines her "humanist" position, elaborated by the author precisely to tackle the problems and analysis of the totalitarian regimes.

According to the author, this became apparent in the post-war era, in connection to the historical emergence of the debate on human rights. For the author, this period significantly brought to light the paradox inherent to biopolitical systems: even though possibly reaching the apex of the formal expansion of human rights, never as in this circumstance did it appear evident that the non-belonging to a certain nation-state meant the *de facto* exclusion from recognition from *any* political system (of rights) altogether. This became clear with the figure of the refugee, which captured the condition of those who could not be counted as citizens and therefore be protected in the name of any substantive rights, but were simply turned into the (passive) objects of humanitarian help, that means, naked life stripped of any qualification or recognition (Arendt, 1943).

The problematic is addressed by the author in *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* (1973). In the famous chapter titled "The Perplexities in the Rights of Man", she voices the following paradox: the rights of man had been created to protect the rights of those who had lost their political status of being part of an ordered political community of *bios*, and thus became object of humanitarian protection. However, the implementation of human rights had shown that it was impossible for those individuals to receive factual and substantial protections, missing a concrete inscription within a national political body. To quote the author: "It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man" (Arendt, 1943: 117). This sentence is constructed precisely on the dichotomy on which I framed the introductory part of the analysis. Those who are considered entitled to protection by means of human rights are actually those who have lost their qualification of *bios* as members of a defined political community, and are returned to the status of *zoe,* of naked existence found at the edges of the political order[15].

[15] The same engagement with the topic appears reformulated also by Agamben. The author deals with it in a text titled "We Refugees" (1995, also later included in *Means Without Ends*, 2000). The figures of the refugee or the stateless person highlight not only the relationship between unqualified political life and the system of nation-states, but in particular that of naked life in relation to the juridical order shaped after such system. In this regard, human rights replicate that mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that legitimise the system of nation-states as the supreme biopolitical apparatus. By radically breaching with this organisational and functional principle, the figure of the refugee emerges as a form of existence which cannot be inscribed in the political world. Given this character of figure "at a threshold", the category of the refugee is thus described as a limit concept. Conversely, the categories of citizenship (and their relation to human rights) demonstrate how it is possible for a biopolitical power centred around the role of the state to manipulate life and decide the conditions for its normalisation by ways of inclusion and exclusion.

This analysis demonstrates that it is thus impossible for individuals to exercise and benefit from their human rights unless they are in fact recognised as deprived of any other protection, that is, unless they are first treated in the status of pure *zoe* of "naked human beings". In such circumstance, the juridical device of human rights functions as a biopolitical apparatus that defines the boundary between politically qualified and natural life, or *bios* and *zoe*, here identified with the status of the naked humanity of the stateless person and the refugee. I maintain that the idea of nakedness of the human can be analytically framed and theorised through the notion of the unqualified life as *zoe* found in biopolitical apparatuses. In this reading, *zoe* is identified with "people who had lost all other qualities and specific relationships - except that they were still human. The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of human beings" (Arendt, 2013:92).

Arendt's interpretation exemplifies the mechanism of the fabrication of the threshold between political and natural life through which the biopolitical system functions. The idea of "appropriate" life (in this case, the one inscribed in the political order of nation states of *bios*) is established and affirms its legitimacy by means of reasserting the exclusion of those who are not part of it, that is, the stateless people that cannot find a space in the logic of the nation state and the bounded national community. Connectedly, the latter are further relegated to a kind of life that is presented as the "improper", a naked, unqualified humanity, which can find no place in the order of political existence.

More importantly for the argument I advance at this stage, however, even though recognising the co-presence and even necessary coexistence of the two kinds of life, the emphasis in Arendt remains on the polarity of *bios* and the domain of organised life, with regard to which the unqualified life of *zoe* only appears as the negative counterpart. In this regard, the figure of the refugee emblematically stands as reminder of the persistence of natural life, which can never be avoided if not by questioning the foundation of the nation-state system in its entirety. Natural life is here exposed in its character of purely passive, diminished and subjected to the operations of (bio)political logics over it. Along with this assessment, it also derives that any political agency remains ascribed to the sole polarity of power expressed through the

idea of the national community and exacerbated by the experience of totalitarian regimes[16].

Moreover, a secondary argument can be added as to how forms of life become qualified. Going back to the specific case of the citizens/non-citizen dichotomy through the analysis of the discourse of human rights, it is possible to observe how, in a biopolitical interpretation, the "nakedness of being human" reduces stateless people to the status of an improper kind of life. In these circumstances, an individual cannot transcend the condition of the "dark background of mere givenness" (Arendt, 1943: 117), once it loses any sign of belonging to the political community. While being produced by the sovereign management of life, *zoe* is downplayed and only judged negatively, in its function of being excluded from the political sphere.

Ultimately, Arendt considers the laws in the two spheres of political and natural life as fundamentally irreconcilable[17]. Once stateless life is entirely excluded from any possibility of qualification or recognition (since incompatible with the sovereign system), it is not possible for it to be accounted for in the political realm. Naked life appears as entirely excluded and depoliticised: it is assigned any value only in light of its positioning within a political apparatus (the structure of state-system and of human rights ensuing from this order) that works precisely by structuring and ascribing meaning to forms of life.

In addition, as demonstrated above, the application of the grounding distinction of *zoe* and *bios* to the specific theory of Arendt (through the categories of citizen and non-citizen) exemplifies the result of a qualification of life which distinguishes a form of appropriate, qualified life (of *bios*, the citizen included in the system of nation-states) and an improper, excluded one (in the form of non-citizen or *zoe* entirely subjected to power structures). An analysis from a biopolitical angle thus brings to light the rigid and binary way of conceiving life as object of biopolitical rationale. It shows how life is constructed as object of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion,

[16] An alternative reading has been advanced by Vatter (2006), who argues that there is a positive conception of the idea of natural and biological life in Arendt through her notion of "natality". I argue that, although possible, this interpretation is marginal in Arendt's work and risks downplaying the force and importance of her analysis of totalitarianism, on which her work focuses.

[17] In this regard, it could be claimed that a different ontology seems to be in place in the two different domains (public and private) here considered (Zakauskaite, 2017). On the one hand, the private realm stands as a sphere of difference, contrasted with the abstractedness and equality pertaining to the public, political life. In Arendt, in fact, a political community pertains only to equals, since individual nature would pose a threat to political activity. In order to safeguard the continuity of the political sphere, therefore, difference needs to be reduced to a minimum. Once again, the negative connotation attributed to *zoe* returns also in this further aspect of the biopolitical account of life in Arendt.

depriving it of any agency or meaning outside of the biopolitical order. Natural life is accounted for only as the negative, as what lacks any autonomous value if not in relation to the meaning assigned to it by biopolitical relations, which define the general politics under which life, in specific historical and social instances, is accounted for.

In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that the very consideration of Arendt's work in the strand of biopolitics may be object of criticism. However, the reason why I suggest that it is possible to include the author here is that, as commentators have noticed (Szerszynski, 2005), Arendt is among the first authors that, along and possibly before Foucault, was preoccupied with the question of the administration of life processes (through the rise of the social) and, even more, with the inclusion and treatment of modes of life (through the post-war human rights apparatus) as a political concern. In other parts of her work she also demonstrates how natural life can be reduced to the status of nakedness, of pure givenness and thus deprived of any value if not in relation to the negative one assigned to it by biopolitical control. Her account closely paves the way to how arguments around the biopolitical treatment of life have been further developed, starting from the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, to whom I now turn.

Giorgio Agamben: sovereign power and bare life

As said, the concept of biopolitics is here understood as the large set of approaches engaging with the question of the intersection of life and politics (Campbell ad Sitze, 2013). More specifically, I have established a definition of biopolitics as any action of power that qualifies forms of life along the continuum *bios-zoe* and that defines the conditions under which certain types of life acquire meaning. Power is here understood primarily as a form of domination which operates through normalisation of life and which acts directly on the biological dimension of the living by qualifying types of life – often with exclusionary and totalising effects.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben is certainly among the authors who engage with this question, by further elaborating on Foucault's legacy. Yet, Agamben also departs from Foucault's thesis briefly sketched above about the control of life as the specific form of modern politics, by arguing that the relationship with (bare) existence provides the mode of operation of politics across all times (Agamben, 1998). In his body of work, life is presented as the ultimate and timely object of the

"anthropological machine" of politics and works as the threshold where politics defines its boundaries by the continuous production and exclusion of life as *zoe*. The outcome is the political articulation and definition of the threshold between *zoe* and *bios*, nature and culture by sovereign power (Agamben, 1998: 102; Peters, 2014: 330). The focus on sovereign power as the centre of the (bio)political structure is primary in Agamben. According to him, the operation of sovereignty is *already* biopolitical from its very beginning: sovereignty works by constantly defining the bare life which remains excluded from the political realm.

The latter point appears the most evident in his theory of the exception. Drawing from Carl Schmitt (1985), he identifies the sovereign with the entity that enacts the ultimate decision to suspend the legal order, thus effecting an anomie. According to Agamben, the exception serves the sovereign's aim of entering into a direct relationship with biological existence:

> Together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life - which is originally situated at the margins of the political order - gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction (Agamben, 1998: 9).

The key relationship defining the function of power is no longer that between the sovereign and the law, but rather between sovereign and the biological dimension of life. With the suspension of formal rights in the legal order, life is disclosed in its pure, bare form, and exposed in its vulnerability and lack of qualification. The legal vacuum created by the exception enables a direct reach on life by the sovereign, to the point of its potential annihilation and reduction to the most naked and disqualified condition (Raimondi, 2016: 59). Agamben draws from these theses to claim that, in the current predicament, life-as-such becomes the fundamental political goal[18].

A clarification is necessary with regard to the idea of "life" found in Agamben's conceptual apparatus. As seen, Agamben, along with Arendt, brings to new attention the Aristotelian distinction between *zoe* and *bios*. Despite the contentions around its historical reliability, such distinction plays a key role in Agamben's theoretical apparatus. In this regard, "bare life" needs to be conceived as pertaining to the sphere of the natural, unqualified life opposed to the organised mode

[18] As it has been suggested (Braidotti, 2013), Agamben's could thus defined a specific *legal-forensic* strand within the biopolitical literature: life is here given meaning primarily in regard to its particular location within the juridical system.

of "ways of life" of *bios*. Bare life coincides with the naked form of existence that remains when life is disqualified politically, and therefore denied any value[19]. In *Homo Sacer*, the author defines bare life as "a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast" (Agamben, 1998: 109). It is precisely because "Western politics has not succeeded in constructing the link between *zoe* and *bios*" (1998: 11) that bare life becomes the principle and the instrument by which politics defines itself: it affirms its boundaries by constantly reminding of what is excluded from them, namely, the meaningless form of life that has no political significance[20].

Agamben's account of natural life as what defines the boundaries of the political also affects his idea of politics from a historical point of view. In Agamben, the difference between modern and ancient politics becomes one of *quantity* or intensity, and not of the quality, with regard to the exclusion of life[21]. Political power has always defined itself by means of the exclusion of naked forms of life outside the boundaries of the *polis*, the nation or the state. Yet, while in ancient times the exclusion remained factual – and *homo sacer* was *physically* banned from the city-state – in modernity, the exclusion takes the form an "inclusive exclusion" (Agamben, 1998: 22) and bare life increasingly shifts to the centre of the political domain. The "inclusion" of bare life within the geographical spaces of the polity, however, does not mean its equal integration within political existence. The bare life that continues to be excluded and yet physically present in the social body functions as a constant reminder: it is the visible sign of the presence of a sovereign that exercises the absolute decision – and, potentially, also violence – upon life (Ziarek, 2012:196). What still remains an outside to politics is made constantly present by means of a process of an excluding-inclusion[22].

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[19] Standing the description provided above, critics have noticed that, therefore, bare life cannot be seen as coinciding entirely with *zoe* either (Ziarek in Sussman, 2012:195). Similarly, Catherine Mills (2015) suggests that it is possible to identify four types of "life" in Agamben (the last being a form-of-life, found in his following works, 1999). Although accepting this critical point, yet, this claim does not invalidate my argument. In fact, both bare life and *zoe* stand as fundamentally excluded from the political domain of *bios* against which their value is defined.

[20] The abstract character of Agamben's analysis makes it difficult to give a concrete shape to the subject of "bare life" in the actual, ontic dimension. Possibly, he is referring to all historical manifestations both in the past and in the present, which demonstrate how forms of bare life have represented a constitutive aspect of Western politics with their systematic exclusion from the political realm (ranging from the ancient Roman exiles to current figures like terminally-ill patients in a vegetative state or refugees). However, many critics have taken issue with Agamben's abstract and allegedly vague account of bare life, either by highlighting its a-historical and quasi-ontological foundationalism (Blencowe, 2012; Mills 2015) or by pointing at the lack of differentiation among the forms of life that the author seems to pool together in a rather generic and vague notion (Colebrook, 2008; 2016; Lemke, 2011).

[21] This is one of the key differences between Agamben's thesis and Foucault's, which instead identifies the beginning of biopolitics in modernity specifically (Foucault, 1978).

[22] Meaningfully, Agamben also identifies the physical locus where this disjunction takes place in the exceptional figure of the "camp". For the author, the camp represents not only a topological but also an analytical figure: the

With the mutation of sovereignty into modern biopolitics, understood as power over life, bare life ceases to be segregated outside the political and is rather included as a constant, normalised (even if sometimes hidden) presence. Differently from Foucault's idea, then, for Agamben, the modern era does not mark any caesura in the historical modes of operation of politics; it rather brings to light and radicalises an element which is constitutive of politics across *all* times. Sovereignty and biopolitics, thus, are not subsequent and distinct paradigm but go hand in hand in organising and qualifying modes of life and existence. As Lemke (2011) puts it, sovereign power establishes itself by means of the creation and continuous reproduction of the biopolitical body. This "disjunctive inclusion" consists in the fact that inclusion in political society is possible only through the simultaneous exclusion of beings who are denied full legal status (Lemke, 2011: 54).

Once again, power decides about the ultimate qualification and meaning that life takes, whether it is a qualified and dignified form of life included in the structure of social relations or, on the contrary, an excluded and subjected mode of existence. The latter still serves the aim of the sovereign, since it enables forms of political control (through the absoluteness of its decision) through which political power maintains and reproduces its function. This occurs by means of the qualification of types of life which are considered politically relevant - by the full inclusion in the organised structures of *bios* - and those that, on the contrary, remain excluded from it in the form of bare life. The latter thus is defined only as the "negative" to mechanisms of power and domination and qualified as object to power logics. In Agamben, this process of classification and inclusion-exclusion of modes of life become particularly evident in the distinction between the human and the animal.

Bios-zoe in the human/animal distinction

The idea of distinctions of forms of life and their qualifications by means of biopolitical logics appear evident in a short text by Agamben titled *The Open: Man and the Animal* (2004). There, Agamben, reflects on how the idea of human being rises historically by means of its progressive differentiation from the "otherness" of

camp is the lawless zone where the dynamic of inclusion-exclusion in the political order becomes the most manifest. In this zone of exceptional legal *vacuum*, power can gain an immediate reach on bare life and exercise a degree of violence "that [...] nevertheless still claims to apply the law." (Agamben, 2005:86). The treatment of bare life in the paradigm of the camp is taken thus as pervasive by Agamben, to the extent of interpreting the camp as the "fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (Agamben, 1998:181).

animality. The author names this historical process as the operation of an "anthropological machine" (Agamben, 2004). The latter term accounts for all those processes in history (scientific, social, political and ontological) which have contributed to the separation of forms of life between human and animal, and their hierarchisation in favour of the former. With this analysis, the author aims at emphasising the constructed character of any threshold between forms of life and of the labels conventionally used to define them. This threshold marks a grey zone of "indistinction" which has been fabricated and defined in different directions in history.

With this vocabulary, largely borrowed from Heidegger (1995), the author alludes to the fact that, in the spectrum of entities that go from persons to things, there exists a vast area of biological life that remains undefined in its belonging to a clear classification as either human or animal. Far from being a fixed biological or genetical characterisation, the definition of what counts as human or animal is constantly recreated by processes of *animalisation* of the human (as for the figures of the "savage", the "beast" or in more contemporary examples of detainees or inmates in inhumane forms of camps) and *humanisation* of the animal (as in the current debate on the extension of animal rights, see Calarco, 2008; Wolfe, 2010) by means of biopolitical logics. It is therefore power that, by continuously establishing systems of knowledge, defines the boundaries of those categories and thus subjects them to its control. Figures like the infant, the savage, the werewolf, the barbarian, the slave, the immigrant, the fool… are all examples of how the anthropological machine of biopolitics has been operating on different subjects and at different points of time. To quote the author:

> it is enough to move our field of research ahead a few decades, and instead of this innocuous paleontological find we will have the Jew, that is, the non-man produced within the man, or the néomort and the overcomatose person, that is, the animal separated within the human body itself. (Agamben, 2005: 37)

All the categories mentioned demonstrate the constructed character of the threshold between the human and the animal that, far from being a natural distinction, has always worked as the instrument used by biopolitical power to structure the fundamental categories of *zoe-bios*. This differentiation, therefore, can itself be seen as nothing but another form of constructing the distinction between bare life and qualified life.

Through his analysis, Agamben clearly shows how *zoe* and natural life works as the passive object of the exercise of sovereign power, which requires its existence in order to maintain and establish the political order. As also Calarco highlights: "more and more "biological" and "animal" aspects of human life are brought under the purview of the State and the juridical order" (Calarco, 2008:94). Bare life, thus, appears as a form of "politicised" existence which functions as the correlative to the polarity of sovereign power. Simultaneously, the process whereby the human-animal distinction is constructed exemplifies the mechanisms of inclusive exclusion in the qualification of forms of life that has been introduced in the previous section. In this case, the mechanism of the anthropological machine causes some humans to be treated as non-humans and vice versa. This implies including some humans into a political operation (like the creation of the camps) while at the same time excluding them from the ordinary political order.

The diagnosis provided by Agamben's account of biopolitics demonstrates how, in this approach, *zoe* and natural life are defined and produced as effect of the discursive structuring of the political order by power: life is thus described as reified, diminished and objectified. Moreover, Agamben's perspective also contributes to exemplify the process of qualification to which biopolitical regimes subject life. The operation of (bio)politics is identified with the establishment and construction of types of life, and distinguishes what can count as "proper" form of life as compared to the one that is instead diminished and disqualified. With the modern political discourse, the distinction between persons and animals is collapsed and reduced to a series of discursive practices that continuously shift the threshold of the very definition of what counts as human - and make it possible to reduce it into an animal (Agamben, 1998, 2004; Esposito, 2012). The treatment of the human-animal considerations by Agamben, therefore, reinforces the idea of a classification of forms of life operated by the discursive biopolitical apparatus. In particular, it shows how life, in this understanding, is defined as passive, objectified and subjected element, incapable of an autonomous existence beyond the status conferred to it by power dynamics.

Nikolas Rose and Paul Rabinow: the construction of biological life

Beyond Agamben's account, other authors develop an conception of biopolitics by looking more specifically at the biological dimension of life of individuals and populations as the ultimate object of governing power. Among them, Nikolas Rose and Paul Rabinow, whose work is often combined, suggest a synthesis where the Foucauldian core concepts of governing populations and formation of subjectivities in advanced liberal-democracies is analysed through the perspective of biology, medicine and mental health studies. Works like *Governing the Soul: the Shaping of the Private Self* (1990) or *The Politics of Life Itself* (2001, 2006b) by Rose focus precisely on how the biological, mental and bodily life of individuals become manipulated and managed under the current evolution of the techniques and practices of life sciences. The aim of the latter, in fact, seems no longer to coincide with taking care of or healing the individual, but with promoting an ongoing normalisation that enables a more and more capillary social control by means of biological and medical practices. Connectedly, individuals and communities are disclosed in their true nature of "artificial" anthropos produced by the current practices of "biopolitics", "biopower" and "biosociality" (Rabinow, 2003; Rabinow and Rose 2003, 2006; Rose 2006b).

In many respects, the approach of Rose and Rabinow can be seen as opposed to that of Agamben within the spectrum of positions of biopolitics. In fact, the two authors are themselves explicitly critical of Agamben's theory, which for them remains limited to an intellectual descriptive enterprise with very weak appeal, and ineffective in tackling concrete and existent realities of the biological rationalisation of the life of individuals and communities (Rabinow and Rose, 2003; Rose, 2006b). This criticism is elaborated around two points in particular.

The first is the too strong attention attributed to the sovereign power in Agamben and the ensuing deadly capacity that the latter exercises upon bare life. The two authors reject the idea that the biopolitical control of life and bodies is always exercised as a management of death (turning thus biopolitics into a factual *thanatopolitics;* Rabinow and Rose, 2006). Contrarily to this, they focus on the other side of Foucault's definition and read biopolitics as the attempt of power to "make live" (Foucault, 1978). This brings them to concentrate on strategies of intervention aimed at fostering life and health by means of medical and biological practices (Rabinow and Rose, 2006: 197). As it is further demonstrated below, health and

wellbeing become thus the main characteristics that provide the criterion for the qualification of life emphasised by the authors' account.

The second point of difference from Agamben concerns the methodological approach. Their intent is to focus on the concrete strategies and techniques that enact the biopolitical power of control and appropriation – and consequently, of qualification - of today's medical practices. This approach is thus contrasted to any philosophical enterprise that aims at providing a purely theoretical account of what life is - especially in ontological terms. The empirical methodology followed by them equally highlights the classification and characterisation that life undergoes in biopolitical regimes under the effects of governing power. The criteria of definition are this time built upon the distinction between (and the production of) normal life complying with standards of health and wellbeing in contrast with the one that does not follow this goal. This is produced as the effect of the gathering of knowledge on the biological existence of subjects by means of medical practices.

Rose opens his "The Politics of Life Itself" (2001) by emphasising how "the biological existence of human beings has become political in novel ways. The object, target and stake of this new politics are human life itself" (Rose, 2001:1). Echoing Foucault just a few passages later, he adds:

> Politics now addresses the vital processes of human existence: the size and the quality of the population; reproduction and human sexuality; conjugal, parental and familiar relations; health and disease birth and death. Biopolitics was inextricably bound up with the rise of the life science, the human sciences, clinical medicine. It has given birth to techniques, technologies, experts and apparatuses for the care and administration of life of each and all, from town planning to health services (Rose, 2001:1).

Rose and Rabinow interestingly connect their analysis on life to the development of life sciences and the knowledge that is acquired through them: being is deeply dependent and related to biological knowledge and medical practices, both in the capacity as their effect (insofar as it is produced by them) and their cause (since the study of being and life enhances further research and expertise). Medical practices therefore play a crucial role in both sustaining and enabling the very existence of forms of being (Rabinow and Rose, 2003).

Reaching even further, Rose in particular is able to demonstrate how the identification of a political qualification of life with the biological dimension of existence does not pertain only to the sphere of concrete, everyday interactions and

practices, but has entered and redefined also the very conception of rights (Rose, 2001:17). The author notices a shift in regard to the function and understanding of rights across time (and particularly with the advent of modern medicine): political, legal and social rights were once linked and determined by obligations and entitlements ascribed on to the individual in the name of a certain political belonging. Today, however, it seems that

> each human being has such rights, simply by virtue of their existence as being of this human kind. Individuals seem to have acquired a kind of biological citizenship – a universal human right to the protection, at least, of each human person's bare life and the dignity of their living vital body. […] It is now possible for human beings to demand the protection of the lives of themselves and others in no other name than that of their biological existence and the rights and claims it confers (Rose, 2001:21).

The passage here shows some resemblance with what mentioned in regard to Hannah Arendt and her consideration of bare life entitled to legal protection for the very fact of its mere existence, of its presenting itself as "pure naked being" – even though in her work, "naked life" was presented in purely negative terms. Moreover, it also reinforces the claim highlighted in the Introduction, whereby biopolitics marks the beginning (or conception) of an utterly different relationship between life and politics: politics is no longer conceived as the artificial domain for the creation of shared values and meanings – for instance, captured in the juridical system of rights. Rather, politics enters the domain of life and exercises its function by obtaining control over life processes and dynamics. In Rose and Rabinow, these processes are conceived strictly as the biological dimension of existence, subject to control by means of medical knowledge and practices.

It must also be observed that in their description, the living body is described as "vital". The reason why the authors fall into the first classification made here, even though acknowledging the "vital" character of life, is that, even if conceived as potentially adaptable and capable of bringing into existence new forms and modes of being and subjectivity, life remains dependent and constructed as effect of the power dynamics. This is made possible through the acquisition of knowledge upon life, by capitalising on its productive and vital capacities. In this context, the classificatory and control procedures of contemporary governing techniques produce subjects that vary along the axis of the level of health and well-being.

Bios-zoe in the healthy/pathological life distinction

In the biological account of Rose and Rabinow, the outcome of the biopolitical control on life is a classification of life forms by means of the knowledge acquired through medical practices - which stand as the form of power active in their particular understanding of biopolitics. This means that the "human person's bare life and dignity" of living bodies (Rose, 2001: 22) obtains meaning only to the extent in which it enters and complies with the normalisation of systems of governing centred around the use of medical practices. Life becomes relevant for (bio)political consideration according to the way in which subjects partake in the regularising practices of power and how they perform along a ranking that varies between the healthy and unhealthy forms of living. In consequence, everything that does not fall into the standards enforced by these techniques appears as the radically excluded, the outside of regimes of governing.

In connection to what was just explored, it is also possible to specify what is the form of power active in this regime. Power is this time embodied primarily in the figures of entrepreneurs, geneticists, clinicians, in their interactions and relationships with patients. By determining the very possibilities and conditions of what exists and the way in which forms of beings should exist, power normalises the collective and individual sphere, reducing the subjects to variations between the "healthy" and "non-healthy" living. The continuous manipulation and appropriation of the meaning and forms of life does not take place at the abstract, nominal level that ascribes each human life equal value. It rather occurs at the level of the biological life of individual beings that are constantly subject to judgments of worth (Rabinow, 2003; Rose, 2001, 2006).

Moreover, Rose and Rabinow add another important consideration as to how power logics are imposed on the individual and how the latter makes herself compliant to these very practices. They concede to Foucault and Agamben that, in modernity, sovereignty has in fact extended its powers over the living bodies of its subjects, and highlight that in this process, the sovereign has also established a "tacit" alliance with "the jurist… the doctor, the scientist, the expert and the priest" (Agamben 1998:21) and all other figures that are involved in practices of medical-biological care of the people.

However, they also put the attention on the opposite move by which the members of the population make their behaviours compliant with the operations of power. They observe that within contemporary liberal-democracies, values like

hygiene and health have become shared and entangled within the aspirations of people themselves. The latter actively contribute to establish a tight correspondence between political and personal desires for health. Increasingly, we witness a growing attention for a personal reconstruction of the body in the aim of a psychological and, even more, physical fitness and well-being. These phenomena for the authors become thus a matter of ethics, which Rose develops fully in his idea of "ethicopolitics"[23] (Rose, 1999).

This, to an extent, opens up to the argument that will be developed later on in the analysis of how subjects respond to the dynamics and forms of control and management of life operated by power. Nevertheless, it is also maintained that the idea of Rose and Rabinow in this regard could still be classified as a controlling and normalising power imposed on life, even though not of a repressive sign. In fact, the ethical account that they theorise is investigated and understood only as a compliance to power logics. It further reinforces the claim that I advanced above, when saying that the definition of life as "vital" that appears in their work does not fundamentally distinguish their position from the other analysed at this first stage of research, since even this productive element of life is co-opted and subsumed by the logics of power and their aims of managing life. Once again, thus, the relevant determinations that qualify life are those imposed by logics of power and interiorised by subjects whose behaviours and conducts are constructed and moulded after these very practices. The latter establish a system of power-knowledge about the status of wellbeing of individuals and the community in the form of medical knowledge and uses it to enact forms of normalisation and control. In the version of biopolitics that Rose and Rabinow offer, the subjects also partake in the reproduction of these practices by means of their ethicopolitical action and attitude, in the form of a compliance and adherence to them.

Also this account, thus, even though making a step further and acknowledging a productive capacity of modes of life to respond to biopolitical medical practices, demonstrates how modes of life remain fundamentally constructed as an effect of

[23] To mention briefly, Rose (1999) also returns to the Foucauldian idea of an ethical work on the self, where the individual conduct has precisely the function of forging and fashioning oneself in relation to its political context – in this case, the standards constructed around the idea of physical and medical fitness and wellbeing. While meaningfully resorting to the conceptual terms introduced by Foucault – like "care of the self" or the idea of self-refashioning – Rose develops them in an opposite direction. Differently from Foucault, subjective response here is not read as an attempt to resist the existent matrix of power. Almost the opposite, it is the instrument by which the shaping of selfhood itself is made compliant with power logics.

controlling power. The self-shaping of one's life in the relationality of power does not function as a possibility of openness to further counteractions to mechanisms of power. Rather, it supports and reproduces them by reinforcing simultaneously the image of a normalised life divided in the definition between healthy and abnormal. The argument put forth here is that also in this particular variation, the sole definition of what counts as "life" assigned of meaning is decided by practices of normalisation operated by power. Rabinow and Rose once again demonstrate how life in a biopolitical perspective remains conceived as constructed by power dynamics and reduced to an object of power control.

Roberto Esposito: life in the *immunitas-communitas* binary

Another author that deploys and further articulates the terminology and conceptual apparatus of biopolitics is Roberto Esposito. Like Agamben, the inspiration of his work can be drawn from Foucault's idea of biopower, and particularly from the author's lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008) and *Society Must be Defended* (2003). From there, Esposito borrows the concern for the control over the biological dimension of the population and the management of bodies aimed at population well-being. Esposito however, also develops his approach of biopolitics by grounding it into the analysis of the history of Europe of the last century.

Esposito's conception of life and its emerging as object of political control is framed through the use of the duality of *communitas-immunitas*. The dichotomy captures the relationship existing between the biopolitical individual and the community or social body. In this couple, *communitas* denotes the bond of the individual to the community, that is, the dimension of existence that puts the individual in relation to its immediate collectivity. *Immunitas*, on the other hand, characterises the opposite movement of retreating and subtracting oneself from the collective sphere and from the expropriative effects that collective existence implies. Even though opposite, *immunitas* and *communitas* are coextensive and stand in a dialectical relation whereby each of them is already reciprocally inscribed in the logic of the other (Esposito, 2011).

Esposito sees *immunitas* as being operative already in the conception of the modern subject of contractualist theories and in the historical accomplishment of a system of rights, as an attempt to obtain immunity from the contagion of the

community (in all physical, personal and economic terms; Esposito, 2007:50). Following this view, immunity appears thus a historical category which is inextricably linked to modernity:

> That politics has always in some way been preoccupied with defending life doesn't detract from the fact that beginning from a certain moment that coincides exactly with the origins of modernity, such a self-defensive requirement was identified not only and simply as a given, but as both a problem and a strategic option. […]. One might come to assert that it wasn't modernity that raised the question of the self-preservation of life, but that self-preservation raises itself in modernity's being, which is to say it invents modernity as a historical and categorical apparatus that is capable of coping with it (Esposito, 2007:52).

Instead of turning in a self-reductive or even destructive mechanism by which the individual can succumb to the intromission of the community, in modernity, *immunitas* becomes the enactment of biopolitical practices that try to minimise the exposure to external social fractures. It fulfils the goal of securing and protecting the individual from the intromission of the society and therefore preserves and maintains individual life. In this sense, it also expresses the highest proximity between security and freedom of the individual, since it minimises external interference.

However, if the logic of immunisation functions as preserving attitude that saves the individual from the external intrusion of the community, the key focus of the author is that the same mechanism can also provide the source for a potential degeneration. His reference to the history of the 20th century is aimed precisely at capturing those instances in time where the logic of immunisation was ultimately used to enact and legitimise "immunisation paradigms", that is, a mobilisation of modern biopolitical technologies with a deadly and discriminatory aim. The example cannot but be identified with the Nazi immunisation strategy culminated in the killing machine of a "thanatopolitics" (Esposito and Campbell, 2006; Kordela, 2013). The Nazi regime exemplified the highest case of the gradual transformation and degeneration from modern biopolitical logics to a thanatopolitics instrumental to extermination. The Nazi immunitary apparatus – operating by safeguarding and preserving the "purity" of the Arian population – enacted an absolute normativisation of life, by suppressing the kind of life deemed "deviant". The degeneration of the immunising principle that defines modernity appears therefore evident particularly when it is turned into an instrument for the production of death (Esposito, 2007). It

starts to appear clear therefore how also in Esposito a differentiation between life as *bios* and *zoe* is present. Biopolitical mechanisms absorb all life and try to reduce it to their own laws in the construction of *bios*; thus, they normalise and qualify the kind of life that requires protection and safeguard against the intrusion of the disqualified life of *zoe*.

In his analysis of the functioning of the historical experience of the Nazi regime, Esposito puts particular emphasis on the notion of the norm (Mills, 2015). As said, the analysis of the Nazi regime in *Bios* shows how the latter was based on a normativisation of life. In this, Esposito takes distance from Agamben's main point and argues that the establishment and maintenance of the Nazi regime was not based on a radical suspension of the law (the creation of a legal void that abolished any tutelage or safeguard of life), but rather from a capillary *regulation* of life, where the norm tried to capture and enable the necessities of the German people. That means, juridical and organisational norms of society tried to incorporate all dimensions of life into a norm that could achieve an absolute control on it, thus also turning it into death.

The operation of the Nazi project was thus based on the application of a transcendent norm (that derived from the point of power of the authority and the *furer*) to include all the domains of life. The authority gains control over life because it manages it by means of the normative system that can reach all aspects, including the natural and vital component of *zoe*. The latter under the control by power. *Zoe* is either incorporated in the politicised order or, where excluded, it remains utterly diminished and unqualified[24].

Esposito's starting account of biopolitical qualification of life fits thus into the classification proposed here. The idea of a normalisation of life by the mechanism of *immunitas-communitas* plays the effect of defining the ways of living within *bios*, often by incorporating also natural elements of life and raising them to the status of a

[24] The further move of Esposito would thus be to look for a way out of this process of total appropriation of life by the political norm. It must be noted here that in the latest developments of his theory, the author attempts to look at possibilities of conceiving a form of life that is not passively reduced to management by the norm imposed by power but is capable to generate its own norm. This applies to the part of his theory that can be more explicitly associated with an "affirmative biopolitics" (Esposito, 2011). This theoretical move consists of superseding the initial conceptions of biopolitics as power over life - in a purely limiting and disabling sense - and replacing it with a biopolitics understood as power of life, which is located in the idea of the flourishing organism and the healthy social body in a more organic perspective, also in relation to its surrounding community of beings. In this regard, there could be scope to explore the relation of this part of his work with the other body of literature engaged by the thesis, that is, vitalism. I will point out below, however, why also this further development is not sufficient to address the shortcomings just highlighted. Since I am here looking at the initial debate that establishes the premises of biopolitics and its idea of life, this line of research falls outside the scope of the enquiry; however, a connection could be traced and this could be attempted in a separate project.

qualified existence. Conversely, where *zoe* remains excluded, it is then entirely annihilated, diminished, to the point that the power over life turns into a thanatopolitics with deadly and destructive effects. Esposito's contribution to this debate consists thus of pointing out the possibility of an exacerbation and degeneration of biopolitical logics up to a point of utmost destructiveness and annihilation. The object of this annihilation is once again *zoe*, which is conceived as diminished, destructed, passive and purely subjected to biopolitical control. This mechanism of qualification of life and inclusion-exclusion by means of the *bios-zoe* dichotomy can be exemplified by a category that emblematically expresses (and, for him, questions) the convergence of law and life: the distinction between person and non-person.

Bios-zoe in the person/non-person distinction

As said, Esposito's criterion for the classification of life is not so much that of the law (as it was for the case of Agamben in relation to sovereignty and in the arbitrariness of any separation from animal life). Esposito identifies the logic of modernity with the paradigm of immunisation, which exercises the analogous function of a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. In fact, the idea of immunity is a concept derived from the field of biology and medicine to define those mechanisms of protection that an organism enacts in order to maintain and preserve itself against possible pathological elements. Immunisation therefore can function as a double mechanism: on the one hand, it could appear as a negative practice of protection against risks (of disease of the organism, in this case, or of danger in the case of a polity or a population). On the other hand, however, immunisation could comprise also of a certain element of adaptation from the side of those exposed to the risk, to the extent in which life has to open itself to the incorporation of an alien force.

Central to this double tendency is the category that is found at the point of convergence of Esposito's biomedical (life as a body) and socio-political (life as community) account of biopolitics: the modern juridical-political notion of the "person" (Esposito, 2012). Esposito argues that it is precisely the centrality of the individual (as said, identified with the single but that is also applicable to the idea of self-preservation of the political body as a whole) that has caused the paradigm of immunisation to become so central for the history of modernity. The only and most effective way out of this closing and limiting tendency for the author consists primarily of altogether getting rid of the centrality of the individual - and of the category of the

"person" that captures and expresses it in the legal sphere. This paves the way for his philosophy of the impersonal, which he elaborates in the latest work of his series (2012). This theoretical development represents a counterstrategy to the idea of the person foundational for the modern nation-state and the juridico-political system more broadly.

The condition of personhood captures the synthesis of the ideas of the citizen and that of the individual capable of self-determination, and thus portable of rights, by means of its inscription into a juridical system. Expanding to some extent the ambiguity that has already been pointed out in relation to Arendt's analysis of the rights of the man and the citizen, also in the notion of personhood, human life remains fundamentally outside the protection of the law. In better words, personhood seems to provide a category able to operate that same mechanism of inclusion and exclusion between *zoe* and *bios*.

As in the case of Agamben's bare life compared to normalised and qualified political life, also the concept of person defines a subject by way of determining to what extent it takes part in the organised life of the community (*bios*) but, at the same time, it is kept "immune" from the latter's contamination by the device of rights. "Persons" are thus defined against non-persons, which also continue to be still present in the political system by means of their exclusion. Once again, the latter appear as diminished and disqualified, even up to the point of extermination and death. According to the different circumstances and points in time, therefore, a certain "normal" idea of what counts as the appropriate form of life (as person) is erected against that which is not. *Bios* is kept secluded and separate from *zoe*, but in this relation the latter remains utterly disqualified and annihilated. To quote the author:

> What really qualifies as person only occupies the central section: that of adult, healthy, individuals. Before and after this lies the no-man's land of the non-person (the foetus), the quasi-person (the infant), the semi-person (the elderly, no longer mentally or physically able), the no-longer-person (the patient in the vegetative state) and, finally, the anti-person (the fool, whom Singer puts in the same relation to the intelligent human being as obtains between the animal and the normal human being - albeit with a clear preference for the animal) (Esposito: 2012: 97).

It could thus be said that, also for the notion of the person, each epoch and context can identify the specific forms of being that are deemed to appropriately fall into the category and those which, conversely, remain fundamentally excluded from it

(the slave as non-person in the Roman empire; the current "incomplete" status of the body in the form of the embryo, the foetus; the subject in the vegetative state as distinguished from the health body…). All these concrete examples reveal the analogous function of the idea of personhood as a biopolitical apparatus that constructs the notion of life that can legitimately enter into the political realm. As consequence of this, while certain kinds of life are normalised, biopolitical mechanisms also select others that remain fundamentally excluded. Also in this case, processes of inclusion and exclusion remain the outcome of a power that operates through immunisation to ultimately establish what counts as appropriate, and thus, politically significant life.

The notion of the person functions thus as an apparatus of inclusion and exclusion. It imposes a norm that structures social relations and, most importantly, defines what or who can be recognised as an adequate subject of the political community. If, for Esposito, who is more in line with Foucault than with Agamben on this point, this becomes the most evident and specific for the juridico-political order of modernity (in relation to which he develops the very paradigm of immunisation), it is also true that similar operations of inclusion and exclusion have been active since very ancient times.

Such an account demonstrates the constructed value and qualification assigned to life as effect of the operation of biopolitical logics, in this case identified with the juridico-political category of the person. Far from being a stable definition that relies on some given properties or essences, the category of person becomes a construct that structures modes of existence within the biopolitical regime. What is more significant for my analysis, along with the treatment of the biological existence, are the socio-political implications of the biopolitical mechanisms: they attribute a value to the type of life that can be legitimately qualified and ascribed of meaning. Even more crucially, this operation produces logics of inclusion of the types of life that can legitimately enter political existence as opposed to those that remain fundamentally excluded from it. Thus, as object of biopolitical mechanism, life is regarded as passive, annihilated and emptied of any meaning of its own, even to the point of reaching totalising and annihilating outcomes as to the way certain types of life are treated.

This is well exemplified in Esposito's analysis through the deployment of the conceptual binary of *immunitas-communitas* and the risks that the passage through *immunitas* implies: it recreates and justifies logics of "otherness" that culminate into pure destruction and suppression of certain modes of existence. Any attempt to escape

the paradigm modernity presupposes the passage through it in a dialectical and potentially destructive sense[25].

In sum, Esposito's formulation of biopolitics exemplifies the same mechanisms of inclusion-exclusion, which, in this particular case, is the result of the operation of the *immunitas-communitas* logic that structures the (bio)political domain. As seen, certain types of life remain excluded and even potentially denied also at a physical level. Life appears devoid and deprived of any value of its own, if not as a construction of the practices and mechanism of power that life applies on it and through which power structures the realm of politics. The examination of Esposito's theory, therefore, further reinforces the discursive construction of life in which the approaches of biopolitics resolve their conception of the politics of life, which is considered one of the ends of the schematic here outlined.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 has delved into theories of biopolitics in order to demonstrate their understanding of the politics of life as a central question of contemporary political and social theorising. Among the many directives and possible lines of development within this approach, the analysis has chosen to concentrate on the element of the qualification of modes of existence around a certain norm of life, and, connectedly, on the way in which life becomes defined in relation to given sets of normalising processes and apparatuses that assign meaning to forms of living. In order to address this aspect, the analysis has engaged with the distinction between *zoe* and *bios* drawn from the ancient Greek language and argued for its theoretical significance in examining how power operates on modes of life. The study has explored a selection of authors who have rearticulated this distinction and used it to structure their own theories around the working of biopolitical regimes. The question leading this stage of the enquiry has been concerned with how the distinction outlined above captures

[25] This may be referred particularly to the further development of his theory defined as an "impersonal" politics (Esposito, 2012). What is missing in Esposito even in his latest affirmative opening is that the way out of biopolitical logics comes at the expense of passing through immunisation practices and to the risk they might produce when brought to a point of degeneration. Esposito's call for a better appreciation of life immanent to living (Esposito and Campbell, 2006: 9) is derived only by the passage through a politics of immunisation and its deadly potentials. Thus, even if the solution for overcoming negative modes of biopolitics is put in an affirmative process, the importance of this immanent kind of life can be fully realised only through the dialectical passage through forms of immunisations and their potentially very destructive and annihilating outcomes. Even this opening cannot thus be sufficient to reconsider modes of life beyond biopolitical normalisation.

mechanisms of classification of life by the operation of a power aimed at its control and qualification.

The first author identified in this regard was Hanna Arendt, of whom I offered a biopolitical reading by looking at her theory of the rise of the social as the progressive replacement of the artificial, autonomous sphere of politics by the dynamics of labour and material necessity. I also tried to show that the distinction between *zoe* and *bios* seems to be reproduced in her analysis around notions of citizens and non-citizens and the case of human rights. Then, the following sections of the chapter have looked at those contemporary authors who more recently have built on and further stretched the theory of biopolitics in new directions: Agamben, focusing on the dynamic of the suspension of the law by means of which sovereignty reaches control of bare life; Rabinow and Rose, who look at the normalisation of contemporary life in liberal-democratic regimens by means of medical practices, and finally Roberto Esposito, who focuses on historical processes of immunisation. Beyond the specific theoretical content of each approach, the argument reverted around their articulation of the kinds of life above presented. All of them, even though with different understandings and formulations, demonstrate how the value and meaning ascribed to life appear fundamentally constructed by the discourses that power enacts upon life. In other words, life derives its meaning only as effect of the qualifying and categorising logics operated by regimes of power. All authors demonstrate how power is always grounded on a politics of life based on mechanisms of inclusion of types of life considered legitimate and exclusion of those that do not fall within the aims of power logics (or are maintained only as their negative correlative). The idea of a legitimate form of life is here identified with the norm enacted by biopolitical apparatuses.

Moreover, a parallel layer of the argument has been concerned with the effect of processes of normalisation of lives ensuing from mechanism of power effectuating the *bios-zoe* distinction. For all of them, power informs certain norms as mechanisms aimed at the regularisation of modes of living around certain standards. These processes of qualification of life are captured by sharp binaries that operate often in exclusionary terms. It has been observed how forms of this categorisation (mostly as distinctive dichotomies) can be identified in the work of each author: citizen and non-citizen in Arendt; human and non-human in Agamben; healthy and unhealthy life in Rose and Rabinow and finally person and non-person in Esposito. All of them

articulate variations of the starting binary between *zoe* and *bios* used as the premise to this debate.

The synthesis of the politics of life as emerging by an overview of approaches of biopolitics is thus that of a life that appears as objectified, constructed, diminished and even repressed and annihilated as effect of logics of power. Biopolitical analysis brings to light how regimes of power-knowledge operate in various ways by moulding, controlling, normalising and qualifying modes of living. This account defines a discursive approach and occupies a first end of the schematic of the politics of life outlined in this first part of the analysis. The latter, however, leaves very minimal or no scope to capture and theorise the capacity of modes of life to respond to the logics of power and challenge forms of domination. In what follows, I will turn to a second perspective of the politics of life which grounds the qualification of life on a materialist and ontological understanding, and uses this premise to derive the meaning and function of politics. This approach is seen to coincide with the vitalist response to the politics-life problematic. By inverting the relationship between politics and life, and assuming the latter as grounding principle, vital-materialism appears to stand in antithesis to approaches of biopolitics and potentially paves the way to an engagement with modes of life beyond the processes of biopolitical normalisation.

Chapter 2
Vitalism and the Power of Life

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the qualification of life within the biopolitical debate by starting from the dichotomy of *bios-zoe*. I suggested that approaches of biopolitics demonstrate the constructed nature of any definition of life, which is produced by discourses of power. Power, which has been identified either with the sovereign (Agamben), with medical practices (Rose and Rabinow) or with jurdico-political apparatuses centred around the idea of personhood (Esposito) qualifies and gives meaning to forms of existence through a certain idea of "normal" life, also producing a classification of the types of life that are included in the political domain. I maintained that biopolitical practices also function through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that define what types of life can legitimately be included in the political sphere. The dichotomies highlighted in the analysis in the forms of citizen/non-citizen, human/animal, person/thing and healthy/pathological life exemplified this classification and demonstrated the mechanisms through which power operates by fabricating the threshold between natural and political, that is, normal and unqualified existence. Overall, approaches of biopolitics offer an acute diagnosis of regimes of power in which life is understood as diminished, exploited, objectified and subjected to power dynamics. However, I maintained that, at the same time, by focusing on the discursive fabrication of the meaning and value of life as object of power, an approach of biopolitics excludes the possibility of the existence of modes of living outside the action of power. In particular, they exclude that life in itself could be endowed of an intrinsic meaning derived from its very subsistence and materiality. Biopolitics has been identified with one of the ends in which a schematic of current debates around a politics of life can be understood and mapped out.

Chapter 2 turns to a perspective that offers an opposite understanding of the question of the relationship between life and politics, that is, an approach of vital-materialism. Vitalism starts from the assumption that, far from being merely a product or object of power dynamics, life exists as an independent and creative force that constantly escapes any attempt to appropriate, represent and dominate it. Life is the

primary essence from which modes of existence and determinate forms of living derive. By seeing life as a force that cannot be reduced to any appropriation or explanation, vitalism appears thus to stand in opposition to perspectives of biopolitics. Vitalism could thus be seen as the opposite end of the spectrum in the schematic that captures current approaches to the politics of life.

However, it is here argued that, even though starting from opposite assumptions and advocating a more inclusive account of forms of life, which seemingly escapes any possibility of fixture into a norm, current understandings of vitalism are not entirely able to get rid of a binary account of life either. In their subsuming their explanation of beings to a pervasive "power of life", a classification of forms of life between human and non-human, nature or things still remains, even though with an inverted order. Moreover, the political project that is derived from these assumptions appears itself over-determined by the priority given to natural life. The ideas of Gaia as the living planet, "vibrant matter" or the "liveliness" of life, which provide some examples of this approach, appear to put pressuring demands for specific and substantive ethical and political commitments. In other words, it appears that it is now life that defines and constructs the principles according to which politics should be informed. If there are many strengths to the contribution that a vital-materialist approach brings to the debate, especially in terms of enlarging the sphere of life and living beings considered in political discussions, yet, it is also maintained that these approaches are ultimately unable to escape the qualification of types of life and attribution of value, and the ensuing exclusions, which was the problem highlighted in Chapter 1.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, it clarifies what is meant by vitalism and how it has emerged in contemporary debates. The first section looks at a "vitalist turn" that seems to enter many approaches in the social sciences. Then, the following section goes on exemplifying some of the debates in which this understanding of life is applied: among the possible, I discuss the perspectives of Gaia and the living planet; the idea of an eco-sophy of zoe-centred egalitarianism and finally "vibrant matter", which underpins some contemporary perspectives of new materialism. The discussion of all these perspectives jointly demonstrates how they all uphold an idea of life as productive, generative and endowed of its own living force. However, it is also intimated that this gesture maintains a classification of modes of living along a distinction similar to the one presented in Chapter 1, even though inverted in favour

of the side of natural life. This risks resulting in a move which puts strong and biding demands on the ethics and politics implied by it – in fact, affirming a power of life from which political practices should be derived. Hence, this step of the argument maintains that, despite providing a criticism to biopolitics and arguably presenting themselves as an opposite approach, perspectives of vitalism here considered cannot fully provide a response to the question of rethinking the normalising and qualifying operation that biopolitics applies to life. The literature in Chapter 2 thus cannot be seen as addressing the question posed by the thesis about how to rethink modes of engagement with life beyond the binary and often exclusionary outcomes highlighted in the analysis so far. The following stages of the study will then attempt to explore an alternative account whereby a power over life and a power of life appear interacting in a more complex and open fashion, by going back to the work of Foucault and his idea of "vital critique" to power. It is argued that, in his theory of ethics, resistance and critique, Foucault introduces an element to escape the normalising effects of power. This will pave the way to an alternative response to the question of the treatment of life grounded on idea of singularity, which I will complete by looking at the naturalism of contemporary Spinozist literature.

Tracing the "vitalist turn" in social sciences

The use of the term "turn" to identify a breaking point in epistemic and intellectual debates may always sound problematic in the identification of novel or emerging theoretical perspectives. However, the recent series of "turns" advocated by a range of disciplines within and outside academia appears unprecedented not to be acknowledged. Recently, there has been an upsurge of several theoretical "turns" termed in various ways: affective (Halley and Clough, 2007; Hemmings, 2005; Thrift, 2008); practice (Cetina et al, 2005; Bueger and Gadinger, 2014); material (Mukerji, 2015; Coole and Frost, 2010); ontological (Escobar, 2007; Martin and Hail, 1999; Widder, 2012). With different theoretical and methodological concerns, multiple approaches spanning several fields and areas of study are increasingly looking at the materiality of earthly processes and phenomena as the starting point for their epistemic endeavours. Across many discourses, there is a proliferation of attempts to supersede purely rationalist and cognitive explanations of the world and construct accounts that move beyond mere human conscious sense-making of it (Flanagan, 2009; Thrift, 2004;

2008)[26]. What seems at stake is a deep renegotiation of knowledge practices towards an engagement with the immanent vitality, matter and embodiment that precedes the construction of theory (Coole and Frost, 2010; Cottingham, 2003).

More deeply, the tendencies just mentioned take place in the climate of a shared radical questioning of the ontological and knowing categories that have historically defined Western thought (Baggini, 2005: Eagleton, 2008). Since modernity, epistemic enterprise had relied on the assumption of the transcendence of human consciousness from the external world, be the latter identified with the physical realm, nature or any object of knowledge (Flanagan, 2009; Greenfield, 2008; Lawlor, 2006). The paradigm of "Cartesianism" precisely expresses the idea of this subjective character: as all-encompassing narrative, the legacy of Descartes (2013) has been associated with a fundamental dualism that separates human consciousness from the external reality. Such separation has ultimately created the condition for knowledge extraction from the world and for any theory formation. As Colebrook notices:

> If 'Cartesianism' functions in the history of philosophy as the false turn whereby we took embodied mind to be inert substance detached from the world, so 'theory' is often overcome by turning to history, philosophy, affects or bodies. 'Theory', today, bears within itself the marks of its own failure […]. But there can now be a 'theory after theory' that maintains critical rigor while also allowing for history, politics and life. (Colebrook, 2010:129).

This chapter is concerned with the shared vitalist assumptions that seem to underpin these developments in theory across areas of the humanities and social sciences. The latter commonly advocate a vitalist immanent perspective, which is particularly concerned with an investigation around the idea of life (Lawlor, 2006). Jointly, these perspectives seek the rejection of intellectualism and linguisticism and the embracement of a radically new way of thinking. By marking an apparent rupture with the dominant trajectory of Western metaphysics, thought and experience are reconceived on a radically mundane and immanent horizon where "life" is encountered. This celebration of immanent materiality of worldly processes and phenomena has become an unquestioned good for part of continental philosophy, and

[26] The shared bases for the series of approaches here mentioned is a renewed interest in materialist, corporeal and vitalist ontologies. In particular, in the humanities and social sciences, this is translated in the central emphasis put on the material dimension of human life. As far as knowledge production is concerned, this is manifested in an increased attention on the concrete practices, performances and enactment of relations (both among humans and non-humans); on processes that operate before conscious and reflective thought and on the superseding of representation as the key epistemological tool for extracting knowledge "from" the world (McCormack, 2005).

is increasingly affecting also the social and political sciences (Coole and Frost, 2013). In countering linguisticism and discursive practices, the vitalist approach thus stands in opposition to the claims of biopolitics, which are grounded on the discursive construction and understanding of the world and life by power and the latter's attempt to subjugate life to systems of knowledge.

The aim of the chapter is to explore the idea of vitality of life as emerging from some of these contemporary perspectives. In particular, the first stage of the analysis is interested in looking at the idea of "life" as the ultimate register where new possibilities of knowledge and experience are reimagined, after overcoming the idea of thought's separation from the material world (Cottingham, 2004). The focus on life in these debates also conveys a reference to the ethical: the call for "life" that many discourses are pointing out invites to a completely and paradigmatically different way of thinking and engaging with the world. The analysis explores the origin of these claims. However, it also intimates that, by doing so, vitalist approaches also posits compelling normative demands as to the political vision that can be derived from these assumptions. Therefore, they lend themselves to a potential similar criticism to the one that has been ascribed to the perspective of biopolitics, that is, fostering a prescriptive understanding of life to which social and political practices should adjust. This will be evident in the last part of the discussion.

The definition of "life" in vitalism

Before moving on to discuss some positions that exemplify a vitalist perspective, it appears necessary to clarify what is understood by "life" in these approaches. It is in fact difficult to establish an all-encompassing definition which would not result in a reduction of the variety of these perspectives and of how they are treated; nevertheless, some common elements can be pointed out.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, vitalism is commonly equated to the philosophical trajectory that runs through Bergson and Deleuze and upholds the inherent liveliness, productivity and self-organising capacities of living forces (Thacker, 2010). More specifically, life is understood as an expansive force that is deemed to flow across all forms of living beings; it is described as self-generating, self-enhancing and lively. Vitalist approaches are thus primarily interested in the ontological question around the living and the principles of life. In this regard, life is thus described a force that embraces all material beings (organic and inorganic) in a

lively continuum. This conception of life is often captured by the idea of *zoe*, which identifies a generative and persistent force of material transformations (Radomska, 2016: 68). My interest here is not so much going back to the very origin of the discussion in the authors mentioned above, but rather examine how this legacy has been taken on by contemporary developments, reflecting on what has been above defined as a "vitalist turn" in contemporary theorising. To this aim, I will attempt a characterisation of these approaches by looking at the contribution offered by Fraser et al. titled "Inventive Life. Approaches to the New Vitalism" (2005), which appears to fit the aims of my analysis and introduction.

Fraser et al. open their contribution with a quote from Bergson: "[I]n vain we force living into this or that one of our moulds. All the moulds crack. They are too narrow, above all too rigid, for what we try to put into them" (Bergson, 1911: x). The visually powerful description of Bergson well identifies the character that is attributed to life in vitalist perspectives. Life is considered as a force that cannot be delimited or incapsulated in any finite form. More importantly, life is what escapes forms of "containment" or representation[27]. The latter aspect is thus of primary importance when put in relation to the conception of power in biopolitics. In the previous chapter, I illustrated how biopolitical regimes function precisely by establishing forms of domination of life, understood as its construction, qualification and attribution of meaning, thanks to the knowledge that power gathers about life.

By defining life as what inherently escapes knowledge and representation, vitalist approaches directly respond to the challenge highlighted by biopolitics: life is what constantly disrupts attempts to know and to appropriate it. Thus, by definition, the assumptions of vitalism seem to invalidate the possibility that life can be mastered by regimes of power-knowledge through which relations of domination are established. A vitalist understanding opposes the treatment of life implied by biopolitics as an attempt to constrain life into normalising systems, with the intent of entirely controlling or subjecting it. The aim (of ethics, of power, of any system which

[27] It must be noted that this will be the very important distinction to be made between the approaches explored at this still critical part of the discussion and the understanding of vitalism that will be taken on by following stages of the thesis. In fact, "life" in vitalist understandings can be defined more broadly as an expansive force that constantly escapes representation. However, as it will be argued at the beginning of Chapter 4, the difference in possible interpretations by these approaches consists precisely in the divide between positions that tend to essentialise and reify life, and turn it into a new metaphysical principle whose normative and epistemic effects are not different from that of a regime of control by the "power over life"; and, on the contrary, an understanding of vitalism primarily as a normative and regulative principle, that is, the idea that even the biological understanding of life always escapes attempts to know it – and thus, in a biopolitical outlook, to enable power over it. The latter line of interpretation is deemed a more productive and fruitful approach that will be followed in Part II of the thesis.

attempts to order life) can no longer be that of "knowing" life through representation, since life becomes known and experienced by other modes and channels, for instance, by alternative forms of experimentations and expression (Fraser et al., 2005; Zylinska, 2013).

Another point to be added is the focus on processes, defined by the assumption of the radical relationality of which life is part, conceived as shifting relations between open-ended objects. This does not imply that such relations are pre-existent but rather that objects, subjects and concepts are *composed of* relations, "reciprocal enfolding and gathered together in temporary and contingent unities. Furthermore, since a relation cannot exist in isolation, all entities can be understood in relation to one another" (Fraser et al., 2005: 3)[28]. The enlarged idea of life that is found in vitalism as grounded on processes and relations thus invalidates any clear divide between the natural and human sciences. It breaches any distinction between types of life forms (conflating them in an idea of a common and continuous life-force, often identified with the idea of *zoe*, see Braidotti, 2013; or the analogous idea of "biophilosophy" found in Thacker, 2015; Schildrick, 2015; Radomska, 2016) as well as among any system of knowledge acquirable over them. This stands therefore in sharp contrast and can represent another issue of criticism against the mode of operating of biopolitical logics, which, as seen in the previous chapter, work precisely by producing qualifications and differentiations among forms of life (for instance, between person and non-person; animal and human; healthy and pathological) by means of processes of normalisation.

An additional characteristic and difference from biopolitics is how the two perspectives envision the relationship between the defining elements of the human condition. Humans, as well as all other beings, are not separated entities that can be isolated and endowed of their own individuality. Rather, they are already part of a series of contingent phenomena. This invites a re-understanding of liveness or presence as a pattern out of which even ideas of time and space emerge, insomuch that they are experienced through embodied existence, and not as separate or abstract notions given *a priori* of any determination. Hence, this approach emphasises the

[28] The author demonstrates this through the work by Stengers, who formulates the idea about a "cosmopolitics". By this term, Stengers means the understanding of a deep commonality among living beings in a posthumanist sense. Quoting her: "The pre-fix 'cosmo' takes into account that the word *common* should not be restricted to our fellow humans, as politics since Plato has implied, but should entertain the problematic togetherness of the many concrete, heterogeneous, enduring shapes of value that compose actuality" (Stengers, 1997: 248).

interconnections among living beings, that are not considered as separate and independent but rather already in relation to one another. They are thus capable of transformation, exchange and, ultimately, they "perform their living function through their interconnections and interactions with other organic and inorganic entities" (Radomska, 2016: 70).

Finally, an element that is attributed to perspectives of vitalism is the endorsement of a perspective of immanence. The idea of immanence is certainly not new as dimension in philosophy and intellectual investigation. Its first traces can be brought back already to certain manifestations of pre-Socratic thought and ancient Greek cosmologies, which fostered an all-encompassing dynamic reality enlivened by internal natural forces (Galloway, 2014; Spindler, 2010). As Kerslake (2002; 2009) notices in outlining the historical development of the idea of immanence, there are two features that pre-eminently pertain to such a perspective: a formal and an ontological aspect. On the formal level, an approach of immanence produces a philosophy that does not appeal to anything outside the terms and relations constructed within that same philosophy. Commenting on the recent "ontological turn" occurred across many social sciences, Nathan Widder echoes the same assumption by defining immanence as a "state of being internal or remaining within, free from external conditioning" (Widder, 2012:17). Ontologically, moreover, immanent thought is taken to be fully expressive of being. There is no moment of "transcendence" from which being originates and, therefore, what exists can never be determined from above, beyond or outside of this very same plane (Kerslake 2002:10)[29].

The incompatibility of oppositions or dualities with a standpoint of immanence is thus implied by the radical reconfiguration of reality. Immanence challenges dichotomies traditionally conceptualised as subject-object, matter and thought, of mundane as opposite to spiritual or extra-earthly dimension of reality. This starting point naturally brings with itself the sweeping away of a series of historical philosophical perspectives deemed guilty of producing a retreat from life in multiple

[29] Hardt and Negri (2000) point out that, because of this reason, it may not appear surprising that, at first, the call for immanence sounded most appealing in the dawn of modernity. Modern philosophy expressed precisely the attempt to "world" reason against truths derived from postulates about theology or god. In this line, the Cartesian revolution and its culmination with Kantianism and the Enlightenment manifested the historical necessity of dismantling systems of metaphysics and regrounding truth in an entirely immanent, earthly and human dimension. The Kantian enterprise in this direction, however, had resulted in a retreat towards reflexivity and self-consciousness and had ultimately put forth the assumptions of a foundational human "nature", thus falling back into a transcendent standpoint. On the contrary, it is only in the affirmationist trajectory of Spinoza - the "anti-modern" figure *per excellence* in modern political thought – that the flourishing of an entire system of immanence had found its highest expression (Hardt and Negri, 2000:80).

forms of transcendence (Israel, 2001)[30]. From the critical analysis of current vitalisms, Western political thought has produced continuous forms of self-imprisonment of thinking and a retreat from the complex, emergent and productive character of life. The latter has been reduced to an inert secondary domain that stands passively in opposition to an active and sense-producing thought. Regaining a horizon of immanence, on the contrary, is deemed to open up the opportunity of rethinking life beyond the categories of a given objectivity or a representing subjectivity, as a dynamic flow where all beings are immersed. In this sense, the recuperation of an idea of active and generative life also brings to light the deep network of relations that embrace all entities before their individual existence.

The "turns" to life in the forms of theories of vitalism, body, matter, living systems produce therefore the effect of detaching existence from any idea of a finite and fully-fledged subject as unitary point of experience and cognition. Classical conceptions of the subject variously characterised as Kantian, Cartesian, Humanist, modern are discarded altogether along with the associated attributes of autonomy, intentionality, sovereignty, reason and rationality (Pin-Fat, 2013), which are deemed to be empirically false (Schmidt, 2013). All these reductionist properties are instead replaced by an immanent vision where subjectivity and objectivity cannot pre-exist one another and are defined only in the unfolding of concrete relations. Even though this critical take might not be the defining and exclusive intent of approaches of immanence, it is certainly one of its consequences. In better terms, the dismantling of the modern idea of the Western "human" appears one direct effect of the theoretical standpoint of immanence here analysed (Zimmermann, 2012)[31].

[30] Platonism created the illusion of a realm of perfect ideas against which the physical world appears as imperfect and lacking (Plato, 1988). Cartesianism spread the conception of a detached and picturing mind opposed to matter in order to introduce the empirical fallacy of the rational representative "subject" (Descartes, 1968). Kantianism, even more, had extended the idea of a judgmental subjectivity to the sphere of ethics and morality by establishing universal principles and categories (Kant, 1997). Finally, analytic philosophy, as only the latest in time, has reduced thinking to the study of ordinary language and logical analysis and exhausted all the possibilities of knowledge in this horizon (Habermas, 1987).

[31] In fact, claims of anti-humanism and the "death of Man" (Foucault, 1970; Althusser, 1968) had already been a cornerstone in the discourse of many post-structuralist sensitivities. Moreover, the theoretical rejection of the modern Western idea of subjectivity has specific impact on conceptions on morality and on the ethical. The transcendental knowing subject introduced by Kant (1997) provided in fact the source of human moral nature and its universal applicability, which was inferred from the primacy of human reason. Thanks to its rational nature, the human subject is seen as participating not only to the physical but also to the noumenical dimension of moral and ethical values. The denial of the conception of the self and the individual as a primarily rational being in favour of the stronger emphasis on elements as emotions, bodily affects, desires, impulses breaks thus the direct connection linking rationality to the inner ethical nature of the subject and independent from its physical reality.

Although recognising the relevance of the questions that vitalism as philosophical perspective poses, I maintain that some of its articulations in contemporary theory cannot entirely liberate themselves from an idea of ordering and qualification of types of life and thus reaching potentially exclusionary outcomes which are only specular, but analogous, to the ones highlighted in regard to the biopolitical perspectives analysed in Chapter 1. This outcome, which follows from their theoretical premises, appears particularly evident when considering the ethical and political implications of some of the claims advanced. I will now proceed by exemplifying some current forms that build on the vitalist perspective outlined above, before moving on to discuss their normative and political implications in the last section.

The forms of life in types of vitalisms

As I started to mention, the range of perspectives that can be gathered under the umbrella term of vitalism is very diverse and any grouping may risk reducing the inherent differences and nuances that characterise each of them. Across this range, it is yet possible to identify some common elements that appear to define a shared understanding of the idea of life by these approaches. Life can be there identified with the positive, enabling sign ascribed to it as vital power. In this first take, life is conceived as a productive, self-preserving and self-furthering force. Across several theoretical perspectives, there seems to be a tendency to reclaim life as a lively principle that infuses the world. In particular, I here focus on three streams of analysis.

First, there is a renewed celebration of the idea of life as self-producing force in the discourse of Gaia and the living planet, which takes life as all-encompassing principle animating both human and non-human entities and ecosystems. Partially connected to this, a second take can be identified with the idea of an eco-sophy and posthumanist perspective fostering a form of *zoe*-centred egalitarianism (Braidotti, 2013). Finally, a further take within this comprehensive perspective coincides with the form of vitalism that emerges from the idea of "thing-power" and lively matter deployed across many discourses within the recent new materialist wave. The following sections of the chapter focus on the analysis of these different sub-streams.

Along with the analysis, however, I also maintain that in their engagement and qualification of modes of life, they are not able to free themselves from analogous but

opposite qualifying and exclusionary outcomes seen in biopolitics, which yet, they allegedly counteract.

The planet as living organism: theories of Gaia

One discourse that can be listed in the first group consists in how vitalist approaches are currently applied to the theory of a pan-natural world infused by a self-furthering living principle. The most representative of these perspectives may be captured by Lovelock's idea of "Gaia" (2000) and the living planet (Margulis and Sagan, 2013). These theories, moreover, share close commonalities with conceptions of nature and the earth that appear in approaches of "deep ecology" (Naess and Rothenberg, 1990; Naess and Kuman, 1992)[32]. Overall, they elaborate versions of geo-centred theories that foster the return to an idea of the earth as a single, complex, all-encompassing and interconnected whole that functions analogously to a living organism. In a materialist account, they offer a celebration of an active life that constantly perpetuates itself by flowing as continuum across all living and non-living beings. The Gaia theory, in particular, originates from the field of natural science (at the intersection of earth-science, biochemistry, geology, system ecology) to claim that all living systems and planetary complexes interact with their surroundings and generate an overarching synergy among mutually regulating networks. These processes help maintain and perpetuate the conditions for the reproduction of life on earth. The underlying assumption is that all living organisms coevolve and develop only in strict relation to their environment and this ultimately produces effects on, modifies and finally contributes to the stabilisation of the conditions of their inorganic surroundings. The name "Gaia" denotes precisely the one single planetary being of which all entities are considered a necessary part. In this view, elements like the atmosphere, the seas and the terrestrial crust would result from planetary processes through the coevolving diversity of living organisms (Lovelock, 2000).

It is possible to go deeper in illustrating the key tenets underpinning the theory. As said, the idea of Gaia prefigures an extra-human world that encompasses an

[32] "Deep ecology" as first elaborated by Arne Naess, offers an ecological and environmental thought which advocates the radically equal value of all living beings beyond their instrumental utility for humans. It claims the profound interdependence and inter-relationality of all ecosystems, which are reciprocally linked to one another for their maintenance and survival. Consequences of these preliminary assumptions are the rejections of any anthropocentric standpoints, human exceptionalism and of environmental logics that still maintain a qualitative division between human and other living beings. Because of their similar outcomes, I will here treat this approach along with the Gaia perspective.

overarching and interconnected web of life. The primary attribute assigned to life-force is the capacity of stabilising the conditions for terrestrial life. Similar to deep ecologism, planetary systems are seen as inter-dependent and mutually regulating one another, missing human attempts to modify or destroy the natural world. Secondly, the all-encompassing life principle is assigned of an expansive tendency that achieves an overarching reach of both the core and the peripheries. The effects and outcomes of each action or transformation are therefore seen as profoundly respondent to the part of the system in which the action takes place, revealing a deep interconnection.

Finally, both Gaia and deep ecologism look more deeply into the actual conditions of humanity's relationship with the natural realm. They reach the conclusions that mankind, populations and cultures can flourish only while maintaining the broadest diversity of species and life-scapes, which all play a role in the comprehensive natural equilibrium. They thus endorse a holistic view that goes beyond the vision of a traditional ecology or environmental problems and embrace a comprehensive philosophy of life. This approach calls into question also the role that humans play in it. In Lovelock's description of the Gaia world: "We have assumed that [Gaia's] role is the maintenance of conditions favourable for all life in all circumstances […]. We have in addition made the assumption that from its origin the human species has been as much part of Gaia as have all other species and that like them it has acted unconsciously in the process of planetary homeostasis." (Lovelock, 2000:119).

Humans, thus, like all other living beings, are equally integrated in the processes of stabilisaton and self-maintenance of the planet. In the latest centuries, however, the mass-scale introduction of industrialised processes has entirely subverted natural mechanisms of self-regulation and played an opposite, destructive effect. The consequence is that anomalous phenomena are read as effect of the alterations produced by the human breaching of the natural order. The alleged interconnection among all form of beings becomes then ultimately interpreted as the subordination of nature to the exploitative and utilitarian purposes of human use. It engenders a negative perspective and charges the idea of ecological interconnection with an apocalyptic tone, which becomes further expanded and linked to problems of environmental crises, climate change and ecological sustainability (Grey, 1993).

The unidirectional way in which human intervention is inscribed within natural processes is the point where the theory of Gaia shows a first limit. The principles

underpinning the theory have the merit of offering a more inclusive account of life, that embraces mankind and expands beyond human boundaries. The way in which this deeper interconnection is developed, however, produces an ultimate closure, rather than opening, of possibilities of thinking human action and interactions with other forms of life in an alternative way. Instead of interpreting the deeper human/extra-human bond as opportunity for a new positive interaction and responsibility endorsed by humans, Gaia theory closes down productive developments and turns into a claim of blame on the human side of the relationship. The bond between humanity and environment becomes thus read in a still vertical way that reinforces the natural-human or, to use the terminology deployed in Chapter 1, the human/non-human dichotomy, by seeing the second term as entirely negative. Instead of using its conclusions to seek for a different approach and ethics of living, Gaia ends up formulating a profound accusation that reproduces a classification of modes of living, this time by ascribing a negative character to human life.

The outcome just described itself derives from other complementary shortcomings observable within the theory. As noticed, first, these approaches are not entirely able to overcome a dualistic division of modes of living (Braidotti, 2013). There is a remaining tendency to oppose the idea of a pure, untouched nature to the sphere of the human and social construction. In other words, divisions between natural and cultural, environment and society still persist; however, this time, they celebrate and take the side of the natural element of the binary. Even if these readings have the merit of pointing out the destroying and harmful tendencies of indiscriminate industrialism, massive consumerist logics and modern individualism, they hardly offer a contribution in deconstructing the very bases of discourses where these dualisms originate. To quote Braidotti, this approach still remains biased in a deeply

> essentialist way. Because there are no boundaries and everything is interrelated, to hurt nature is ultimately to hurt ourselves. Thus, earth environment as a whole deserves the same ethical and political consideration as humans. This position […] is a way of humanizing the environment, that is to say, a form of residual anthropomorphic normativity, applied to non-human planetary agents (Braidotti, 2013:76).

In the exaltation of a deeper understanding of the earth and the planet, thus, there appears to be an ultimate reproduction of a form of naturalistic foundationalism. Claire Colebrook (2010) advances a similar criticism against the unsuccessful overcoming of

old patterns of normativity in vitalist approaches analogous to Gaia. In her view, a profound contradiction remains at the basis of these holistic perspectives. On the one hand, they reject pre-Gaian or Cartesian models which exalt the cognitive capacities of the mind. They criticise the latter's inability to account for processes that take place beyond the narrow range of human subjects and their domination of matter (Colebrook 2010:146). However, this move produces an exaltation of the vitalist principle deemed to operate within nature. Overall, vitalist approaches here ultimately fall prey of an essentialising gesture, that takes life as absolute and undiscussed principle. Life functions as taken-for-granted *a priori* that continually produces and gives meaning and direction to reality. Rather than the absorption of human exceptionalism within a homogeneous realm of living nature, the outcome is the maintenance of dualistic normative schemes, this time inverted in their polarity. Gaia, therefore, operates a *humanisation* of the environment, by conflating all forms of life in the same condition. Moreover, the pre-eminence of this living principle subsumed to all nature ends up over-determining the possible contents and action also in the sphere of the social, ethical and political human interaction. This "appropriation" of the social domain by natural life produces a shaping of the laws governing the human and political sphere by the assumption of the absolute principle of life: this time, it is natural life to define the laws and norms regulating socio-political existence.

To summarise, therefore, the merit of Gaia is to open up a way to conceive modes of life beyond the human and potentially extend them also to forms of inorganic existence. However, it still attaches a qualification and attribution of value and meaning to types of life, this time in favour of the natural term of the relationship. The distinguishing features that were assumed to be privileged attributes of human life (in the criticism outlined above) are now extended to life in general. In particular, properties of self-renewal and relationality can now be observed in the capacity attributed to a self-perpetuating nature as productive, creative and relational. The figure of Gaia becomes thus symptomatic of a "theological aesthetic of the living being" (Colebrook, 2010:164). If humans were once understood as the original point of meaning assigned to the world, it is now nature that manifests this subjective character. A normativity that distinguishes among subjective and objective faculties, inert or lively matter, then, is not abandoned, but simply replicated and reaffirmed in an inverted sign. Holistic approaches remain entrapped into this essentialising gesture

that still places its normative standpoint into an absolute source of life and cannot grasp the multiple relations that constitute its forms.

The vital-materialism of "thing-power"

A second sub-stream that can be identified in the larger group of vitalism corresponds to some recent positions in the horizon of new materialisms. This account advocates a "vital" or "thing-power" ascribed to materiality. In this account, matter is not considered an inert and passive element, but is endowed of a lively and emanating life force. The primary effect of this assumption is the attribution of agency to materiality. The theory of Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter" (2010) is possibly the most exemplary position in this direction. Referring to past trajectories of thought, "thing-power" (Bennett, 2004) wants to identify the strand of materialist philosophies that runs across Lucretius, Spinoza and Deleuze[33]. The very definition of "vibrant" or "vital" matter is aimed at distancing her materialist standpoint from claims of historical and dialectical materialism of Marx and Adorno, but also from the "body materialism" deriving from the trajectory of Foucault and more recently Judith Butler (2006, 2011).

Ultimately, her position of vital materialism could be gathered in the wider perspective of current trends of new materialism. As shared principle held across such positions, the renewed interest in matter provides the touchstone of a novel radical ontological project sensitive to a vital and dynamic philosophy of processes (Whitehead, 1929; DeLanda, 2006, 2013) and new forms of human-material entanglements. From an ontological perspective, new materialists advocate a philosophy of protean monism, which rejects the dualistic assumptions of cultural modernity (in the forms of mind-body; nature-culture; subject-object) in favour of a unitary account of reality where multiple and interconnected entities are continuously linked to one another[34].

[33] In this regard, it could be objected that my analysis also looks at contemporary readings of Spinoza to complete an alternative account of the politics of life. However, my argument in that regard applies especially to a Spinozist theory of parallelism and relation between mind-body, along with the impact that ideas have on the surrounding environment, which have been highlighted in the contemporary Spinozist turn by authors like Deleuze and Sharp (Spinoza, 1985; Deleuze, 1998b; Sharp, 2007). Even though I also build on the premise of the profound relationality that a Spinozist system suggests, the result of my reading is very different from the one elaborated by Bennett.

[34] New Materialism, possibly like biopolitics, has itself become a very largely (and often loosely) deployed term to characterise a variety of perspectives in many disciplinary fields. The main authors I refer to with the summary provided here possibly prioritise the following: Bennett (2001, 2004, 2010); Blaagaard and van der Tuin (2014); Coole and Frost (2013); DeLanda (2006, 2010); Barad (2003, 2007). The principle at the core of new materialism have been collected by some authors into a "decalogue" (Connolly, 2013b; Coole, 2013; Cudworth and Hobden, 2015). A fuller discussion of the key claims of these positions would require much more space and room for analysis. However, my interest here is again to insist on the analysis of the function and meaning assigned to the

The underpinning assumption of Bennett's particular variation of material vitalism is based on the idea that all entities in reality are endowed of "thing-power" (Bennett, 2004; 2010). "Thing-power" is taken as all-encompassing ontological category that defines the capacity of any sorts of entities to generate influence or produce effects, which eventually become themselves part of a complex set of interconnections. What is distinctive of this theory is that "thing-power" pertains to materiality in all its forms, and provides thus a unifying principle for all the organic and the inorganic, the biological and the inert, the human and the non-human realms. From this starting point, it would thus seem to directly engage and respond to the processes of classification of life explored in regard to biopolitics, which were built precisely on the fabrication and structuring of forms of life. The attribute "vital", which is placed before the label of "materialism", denotes precisely this force inherent to *all* matter constitutively. Thing-power manifests itself as a constantly active, performative, generative and self-creating energy (Bennett 2010:17). Material assemblages and complexes are thus endowed of capacities for self-organisation, emergent properties, adaptability and, above all, agentic potencies that are recognised in all forms of beings[35].

The assumptions of vital materialism suggest a deep rethinking of the division between humans and non-humans, persons and things deemed a false dichotomy applied to reality. Similar to some outcomes already discussed, vital materialism encourages to develop a deeper sense of consciousness and responsibility for human's attachment and embeddedness in the world. Bennett voices it by saying that the acknowledgement of thing-power should enhance the pursuit of "greater recognition

concept of life in these perspectives; I then need to shorten the discussion of the deeper context in which this discourse is situated.

[35] In this regard, some aspects of the approach of vibrant matter can be considered as overlapping with the claims already seen in the Gaia perspective. However, some differences between the two remain in that Gaia focuses on the interconnection of (eco)systems that ultimately produce the stability of the planet by coordinating with and balancing each other. On the contrary, thing-power focus more broadly on an idea of *elan vital* (Bergson, 1911) that appears present in materiality in general. This is used as fundamental attribute to ascribe agentic capacities to matter. They thus overlap on the idea of a "life" as self-furthering force that is present in the natural and in the material, along with the human domain. Where they remain distinct is instead the finality that they pursue: Gaia theory wants to stress the interdependence and openness of systems to their surroundings, in a form of comprehensive organicism. The "thing-power" approach, instead, is interested in situating vitality in matter to counter reductionist understandings that tend to equate materiality to a sphere of pure determinism and linear causation. As highlighted in the first section, moreover, they reach different conclusions as to the possibility and patterns of human action in their accounts of vitalisms. Gaia, as said, ultimately ends up in a closure that reads human agency as fundamentally detrimental and destructive. This assumption ultimately depicts the current mode of human-nature relationship as generally precarious, unstable and fundamentally hostile. Vital materialism, on the contrary, embraces a more constructive reading and uses the renewed interest in materiality and nature as an invitation to develop more constructive interactions between the environment and humans.

of the agential powers of natural and artifactual things, greater awareness of the dense web of their connections with each other and with human bodies" (Bennett, 2004:349). Human beings should develop an increasing sensitivity and awareness of their being part of complex networks of processes that cross the natural-social divide and encompasses all beings.

These premises also result in the shaping of an ethico-political project that enables the acknowledgement of thing-power and the inclusion of all entities that count as "actants" (Bennett, 2004: 354). The ethical attitude suitable to a vital materialism is built on a positive affirmative "fascination" for the material world. The non-human is a manifestation of "thing-power" that raises awareness of the vital abundance and the liveliness of materiality (Bennett 2001:5). The author names her project a "political ecology" (Bennett, 2004: 365). The term "ecological" can be applied in a twofold sense. First, ecology describes her account of ontological relationality. Moreover, an ecological ethical and political attitude is the objective to which she addresses her materialist theory. Bennett's interest in a political ecology leads first to the practice of new ways of looking at the world of humans and non-humans jointly. Her whole theorisation of thing-power and ethics is driven by her intent to discuss whether it is possible to build new forms of publics and assemblages comprising humans *and* non-humans (Bennett, 2010:106). In her work, she often quotes Latour as an author who shares a similar goal (Latour, 2005a, 2005b).

Her aim is thus directed at experimenting on alternative practices, in order to reinforce the unification of all forms of matter and involve agents *politically* in this shared enterprise. As seen, such aspect is already present in her first theorisations on thing-power, but emerges in particular in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), where she devotes a chapter to the analysis of "Political Ecologies". The definition of what counts as "political" in her account is found in the concluding remarks on thing-power: "Its *political* potential [of vital materialism] resides in its ability to induce a greater sense of interconnectedness between humanity and nonhumanity" (Bennett, 2004:367). What emerges is therefore a normative invitation to contribute to the development of an "ecological ethos" that can be transposed also to the collective sphere (Bennett, 2004:347).

The attempt to overcome the human-nonhuman divide in the name of a vitality of materiality that is found in any forms of being (and the ensuing rejection of binary logics that follows from this) seems to put her work in relation to the analysis

performed on biopolitics. This, however, can be the point where the shortcomings of her position emerge. It is worth noticing that, whereas biopolitics appeared to be grounded on mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, this variant of vitalism starts from an opposite perspective, which postulates a priori the inclusion of all forms of being in what can be defined as "the social". This ensues from the assumption of an ontological egalitarianism that assigns an *a priori* value to all forms of being. Although sympathetic with the claim, yet, the latter seems not to resolve the problem of how modes of life and being are produced and become object of consideration also as an effect of power discourses. Rather, the solution seems here to be found by bypassing the problem altogether and starting from the unconditioned affirmation of the value of life, which thus becomes grounded on an absolute and transcendent principle.

The criticism about the inability of this theory to overcome a binary and dualist treatment of world entities has been expressed also in other criticism. Zizek (2016a, 2016b) for instance, claims that in the overall discourse of thing-power, there is no fundamental abandoning of dualist schemes that are criticised in modern thought. The perspective of vitalism that comes from expressions of more recent forms of materialisms seems to challenge the distinction between a subjective and an objective form of experience. However, the argument with which this attempt is developed ends up putting the responsibility again on the side of the human. This operation reinforces, rather than weakening, the differentiations of the agents that are able to make a difference and the classification of what entities and beings count in the making of a natural *and* social world. This manoeuvre, therefore, ends up reaffirming ideas of nature-culture, subject-object, nature-world divides that the perspective tries to oppose. In this, the position of a vitalist thing-power could be pooled in the same objections that have been advanced in relation to the first sub-group of spiritualist theories of nature of Gaia. What they operate is ultimately a humanisation of the natural world now infused with the same anthropomorphic subjective properties.

A similar critique is expressed by Andrejevic (2013), who also emphasises how the celebration of vital materiality and new modes of interconnection between the natural-social or human-nonhuman world have the effect of re-establishing the pre-eminence of human intentionality and agency that they claim to undo, or at least disperse. In fact, the emphasis on ''agentive capacities'' of objects and things and on the emergent character of multi-actant interactions is supposed to replace the primacy of human subjectivity and responsibility that has been the key focus of discursive and

linguistic turns (Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2012). Bennett even explicitly uses the language of a democratisation in a posthuman sense aimed precisely at breaking the boundary between human and nonhuman (Bennett, 2010). However, this reading does not seem to take into account the processes through which life becomes assigned of meaning and value. Moreover, the outcome obtained proves almost the opposite to the one that is declared in the intention of the work. To quote Andrejevic:

> In Bennett's case, the result is the clear affinity between an account of, say, global warming that embraces the logic of what she calls ''thing power'' and a critique of environment activism for fetishizing human agency. The spirit of Bennett's account pushes in the opposite direction: her hope is that an anthropomorphizing tendency that cultivates an attentiveness to the call of matter might deflate the self-importance that fuels a destructive sense of human entitlement. However, her logic pushes in another direction: the dismissal of the very notion that global warming is the result of human agents and activity as yet another symptom of an overweening anthropocentrism. (Andrejevic: 2013: 226).

Thus, the framework in which assessment of the value of life and its modes are assigned is not challenged in its binary and exclusionary structure, but continues to be present even though with a reversed polarity. Although Andrejevic's argument in the article is primarily addressed at making a point on the possibility and room left for critique in these approaches (which he sees in highly sceptical terms), the criticism advanced proves effective. It demonstrates how, far from freeing itself from the normative assumptions of the approaches it aims to reject – those enforcing a clear dichotomy of political-natural world, society and nature, human and animal and other non-human beings – a vital materialism, too, also remains within this same framework, of which only the polarity and focus are reversed.

Ultimately, the form of vital materialism here explored seems unable to propose an alternative to a treatment of life beyond the potential exclusions and qualifications among forms of being that had been highlighted by biopolitics. It appears to remain within the same framework that establishes a normative assessment and hierarchy of the types of life that should be included in the political domain, thus reproducing similar, even though potentially opposite, logics. These shortcomings are produced by the assumption of a force of life that seems to dissolve the order and structuring of the material and social world in its ontological presumption but also,

crucially, in the normative demands that it imposes on the political and social worlds[36]. In this account then, life is not freed from the constraints of being assigned value or meaning; it is equally absolutised as an active, generative principle which becomes itself the source that infuses meaning and direction to the world. Even though specular, thus, the answer it provides regarding the treatment of the idea of life (and its interaction with the political and social) does not succeed in addressing the problems identified in biopolitics[37].

A zoe-philosophy of affirmative life

Among perspectives that celebrate an affirmative and generative force of life, there are positions that formulate types of posthumanist theories, often defined with the labels of a "zoe-philosophy" or eco-sophy (Braidotti, 2013; Davis, 1986; Guattari, 2005). Among those, Rosi Braidotti in particular elaborates a version of this sensitivity, which she labels a philosophy of *zoe*-centred egalitarianism. I explore this position in order to exemplify this further strand. Braidotti's interest, particularly in her latest work (2013) is to outline a new affirmative theory of a posthuman subjectivity. The author defines her attempt as a "critical" posthumanism (distinct from alternative forms of reactive and analytical posthuman, 2013: 38), which seeks to inscribe a renewed idea of the subject into the assumptions of a vitalist ontology and a philosophy of becoming. She presents her theory as an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings that places particular emphasis on a subject's relationality with the world

[36] In other perspectives, this ethico-political demand is charged with a more historical character as imposed by the acknowledgement of the current historical conjuncture. This is the case of a minor author that yet can still be connected to the approach of new materialism: Zylinska (2014), who engages specifically with the discourse of the Anthropocene. To present it shortly, in the author's view, the current, more and more precarious bio-geological condition of the whole planet brings to light the unprecedented threat directed against life in all its forms and humanity as whole species. Her starting concern is the experience of a threat to life in major proportions, especially towards the human population as a whole. In this context, the current ecological and historical conjuncture can have the merit to function as a new "ethical pointer" (Zylinska, 2014:125) that could enhance the development of a qualitatively different ethical mode in order to address this threat. In this sense, she might be seen as regaining a broader claim than the more specific focus seen in Bennett. The author's intent is rather to outline a viable position on ethics as a way of living a *good life*. That means, searching for a new "affirmative framework for the times when life is said to find itself under threat on a planetary scale" (Zylinska, 2014:13). This can also be read as an additional example of the connection between ontological assumptions and ethical demands that pertains to perspectives of vital materialism.

[37] It must be noted that, to a certain extent, the claims that Bennett derives in relation to the ethical attitude and responsibility projected on to the human may not be entirely dissimilar to the claims that will be made by the thesis in regard to the ethical perspective derived. However, what is found problematic is the assumptions underpinning these claims and the absolutisation of a role of a power of life which is not mediated or does not take into account the structures and relations of power which inform ways of living and being. Reversing the problematic in favour of a pure affirmation of a power of life does not address the impasse of the enigma of biopolitics highlighted in the Introduction, but rather it bypasses it altogether.

and other beings, and owns a deep sense of collectivity and community building (Braidotti, 2013:49).

What is interesting for my engagement with this work is that Braidotti vocally and explicitly takes position against current developments of biopolitics, of which she is highly critical. In particular, she rejects the outcomes of some contemporary biopolitical perspectives that put emphasis on life as the horizon of death. Targeting especially the work of Giorgio Agamben, she criticises his definition of life/*zoe* produced by the lethal effects of sovereign logics exercised on a subject that is utterly reduced to its bare life (Braidotti, 2013). In her view, the latter is portrayed in a condition of absolute vulnerability, annihilation, subjection. In a full section devoted to the possibilities for moving "beyond bio-politics", she argues that the new practices of bio-political management of life mobilise subtler degrees of death and extinction (Braidotti, 2013: 115).

It must be recognised that her criticism, as it will become clearer later, concurs with a part of my argument: many of the current developments of contemporary biopolitical discourses have departed from (for her, perhaps, betrayed) the initial assumptions of Foucault and have rather put a stress on the necro-political and thanatopolitical function of (sovereign) power, by locating its operation only on the horizon of extinction and finitude of life. In fact, there are more than one point that my analysis could seem to share with some of the yet interesting claims that Braidotti advances. However, what is found problematic is not so much the critique but the alternative answer that the author provides to address the problems inherent in biopolitics. To contrast the annihilating and totalising outcomes of biopolitical rationales, she invites us to look at the vital and self-organising powers of Life/*zoe* and the way in which the latter "undoes any clear-cut distinction between living and dying" (Braidotti, 2013: 115). The solution provided thus consists of celebrating and practicing a politics of *life itself*, conceived as a generative force able to transcend the division between life and death. The latter approach is made possible by a move beyond any notion of the self and the individual, in order to transcend one's identity into a continuous, impersonal flow of life.

I maintain that this argument lays the ground to criticism when discussing the qualification of life that emerges from this system. The response to the annihilating and totalising operation of biopolitics is there searched in an eco-philosophy that takes life as a foundational principle and absolute term of value and meaning. The latter

account seems to result in a metaphysical system that reproduce an analogous binary and qualification of forms of life to the one seen in operation with biopolitics, even though with a specular and inverted sign. More specifically, *zoe*-centred philosophy fosters a clear definition and characterisation of what natural life amounts to: life is defined in purely positive, generative and productive terms. Therefore, those elements and forms that do not conform to the infinite productivity and liveliness of life are not accounted for or are ultimately excluded from any consideration. This is important, since, by applying a reading of these positions as an ontopolitics of life discussed in the Introduction, it emerges how certain modes of life, or the struggles and conflict that characterise them, remain excluded from analytical and practical consideration. I will demonstrate how vitalist accounts are unable to grasp the struggle and domination to which certain modes of life are subject in the short example discussed at the end of Chapter 4.

Moreover, an additional observation could be applied to the ethico-political implications that the author draws from this metaphysical stance. Her attempt to formulate a specifically post-humanist theory takes as critical object an understanding of humanism, and particularly of the subject that the latter implies. As the following excerpt demonstrates:

> My position is in favour of complexity and promotes radical posthuman subjectivity, resting on an ethics of becoming […]. The focus is shifted accordingly from unitary to nomadic subjectivity, thus running against the grain of high humanism and its contemporary variations. This view rejects individualism, but also assert an equally strong distance from relativism or nihilistic defeatism. It promotes an ethical bond of an altogether different sort from the self-interest of an individual subject, as defined along the canonical lines of classical Humanism. A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or "earth" of others, by removing the obstacle to self-centred individualism. (Braidotti, 2013:50).

The removal of a position of individualism (and particular of the key figure of Man that has been put at the centre of humanist assumptions, Pin-Fat, 2013) implies the renegotiation of the relationship with any form of "otherness", be they human, animal or the environment. This is another key point to relate to the argument that I have advanced in the previous chapter with regard of the qualification and binary exclusions that are produced by biopolitical discourses. The centrality of the idea of the human is deemed to have dictated the model or norm in determining ethical and

political relations (particularly in the history of Western political theory and philosophy). Addressing this problem, for her, means re-engaging imaginatively and affirmatively with the categories that have been excluded from this qualification, which, similar to my analysis, could itself be read as the operation of a biopolitical machine. This entails embarking in a process of cultivation and experimentation of new relationships with the many forms of "other" that the hegemonic discourse of humanism has produced: the gendered and sexualized "other"; the racialized "other"; the animal "other"; the natural and earthly "other"; the machine "other" (Braidotti, 2013: 67-95).

However, once again – and not too dissimilar from the critique that she herself had moved against the previous approaches of Gaia – this solution seems more the result of a same inversion of the categories at stake, without yet problematising the very binary logic on which these attributions of meaning to life are based. By celebrating a posthumanist mode of living (and in fact, collecting all the excluded categories listed above in the label of the "posthuman"), she still provides a solution that does not fundamentally challenge a foundation around the idea of the human in the first place. In other words, her thought remains still heavily defined around the idea of the *human* self, seen in charge of renewing itself in the name of its embeddedness into a cosmological dimension. The form of species-egalitarianism and "critical" posthumanism that she offers is not ultimately able to overcome the problems around the notion of the human that generated her question and criticism in the first place; rather, it simply inverts the emphasis on the opposite polarity, by celebrating the incessant, self-perpetuating and vital forms of life.

This point has been highlighted by Cornell and Seely (2016), who develop a similar argument by taking issue with all forms of celebratory posthumanisms, which build their critique on the claim of dismantling the idea of the human, when in fact they reassert and reaffirm it by the apologetic gesture of enlarging the consideration to all those forms of othering that had been excluded from this discourse. To quote the authors, this move stands as a form of

> recuperative gesture which enables Man to continue surviving vampirically by appearing to be dead while appropriating his previously excluded Others as his now proper domain. […] While making atonement for his past exclusion and exploitation of the rest of the universe (i.e., women, the colonized, nonhuman animals, "life itself", the Earth), Man redeems himself while simultaneously annexing these prior exclusions (Cornell and Seely, 2016: 4).

Despite the critical claims, also in this form of posthumanist discourses the idea of the Human, or Man, continues to provide the normative ground on which attribution of the value of life is made.

Moreover, a similar and complementary point is advanced by Colebrook (2014), who, with reference of the concept of the Anthropocene more specifically, argues that in order to accomplish a real "posthumanist" standpoint, any attempt that defines itself in this way should free itself from *any* reference to human and anthropocentric condition and being able to embrace and grasp the meaning of the nonhuman and extinction as such. Once again, thus, this series of critiques demonstrates that philosophies that celebrate the value of life, or life as such, as in the case of an impersonal, generative flow of life as *zoe*, are not able to liberate themselves from the normative and qualifying discourses that impose a fixed and absolute value on certain types of life, and derive their ethical, political and normative stands from these assumptions.

Therefore, even though, as mentioned, there might be potential points of commonality between my argument and Braidotti's theory, the solution that she suggests cannot be considered satisfactory in two main regards. First, she offers an absolutising and almost transcendent idea of Life-*zoe* as a metaphysical principle which gives meaning to beings. In an ontopolitical perspective, this assumption excludes certain modes of living and being from consideration in the ensuing political and philosophical project derived from it. Secondly, even though taking issues against the binary and exclusionary logics pertaining to some alternative discourses (like biopolitics or humanism), this approach is not able to overcome these dichotomies and end up reinforcing them, even though with an opposite sign.

Normative implications of a vitalist idea of life

After discussing some perspectives that draw from assumptions of a vitalist ontology, I would like to focus on the normative and epistemological implications that can be drawn from these accounts, especially with regard to the idea of a norm of life that provides the starting point of the thesis. In the biopolitical perspective, modes of life and the standards and qualifications that defined them were seen as generated and constructed by the discursive action of power and systems of domination. In the latter

account, life appears subjected to an external source of meaning and norms, which detaches life from the dynamism, openness, creativity and productivity of relations.

An account of vitalism, which starts from the assumption of the value ascribed to life in its material force and encompassing all beings, may seem to potentially find an answer to the problem posed in Chapter 1 about how to rethink the norm of life in non-exclusionary and binary terms. First, as mentioned, the emphasis on life as immanent force encountered in the world poses the problem of something that cannot be constrained in any scheme or fixed representations. It suggests a new "(non)-paradigm" that moves beyond stable models and normative structures. The turn to life explored in the first section formulates the call for a model of thinking and acting that embraces "relationality as such" beyond schemes of representation. Vitalism excludes the assumption that the meaning of life could derive from any source that is extrinsic to the phenomena and processes that happen within life itself. The liberation from all schemes and structures in a post-transcendental standpoint invites us to abandon any strict idea of normativity (Patton, 2002). Hence, as it has been suggested, the unprecedented epistemic challenge that an approach of vitalism suggests is not just another dispute on the *content* of the norms that should regulate life, but a deeper question on the very conditions of normativity itself (Smith and Patton, 1996). To put it in the words by Colebrook, "what is at stake in an immanent turn (to life), then, is not a dispute regarding the norms toward which life relates […] what is up for debate in the turn to life is not this or that political model, but the relation one bears towards models" (Colebrook, 2010: 133).

However, simultaneously, the way in which certain approaches analysed here develop this implication seems to result in a replication of a normative and qualifying understanding and definition of modes of living. In the previous sections, I maintained that many of the discourses that are nowadays championing "life" fail in accomplishing this step by replicating certain qualifications of life. Their account of relations among beings, and particularly the ethical and political models grounded on the assumption of immanent vitality, result in projects that reinstate opposite, but analogous, divisions to the ones highlighted by the biopolitical literature. The versions of vitalism explored at this stage do not abandon the idea of a principle that, by being already endowed of its own meaning and properties, defines the qualification of other

forms of living and being[38]. This was apparent in the perspective of Gaia, which proved not able to overcome a division between the human and the natural or living and non-living world. Hence, it proved ineffective in providing an alternative account where an engagement with life is instead discussed in its contingent, situated and multiple character beyond any pre-given characterisation.

Moreover, another criticism could be advanced. It could be claimed that, across all the discourses presented, life seems to be turned into a foundational constitutive principle pervading, and indeed, informing and giving meaning, to the plane of immanent materiality. To phrase it better, in these discourses, life ultimately emerges as an ahistorical and absolute category that appears already oriented towards a predetermined outcome of liveliness, positivity and harmony. This move turns life into an *a priori* principle, which betrays a closing-off and inherently foundational character (Rekret, 2016; Noys, 2010; 2011; 2012). Despite the declared intentions to remove any residual principle or "essence", these discourses end up absolutising and essentialising "life" and ascribing it a specific and well-defined set of attributes. A similar point appears in Colebrook, who notices that "a certain image of life has now become dominant [and] life is accepted as *prima facie* good, and as the foundational virtue in a world without foundations…" (Colebrook, 2010:134).

Finally, and most importantly for my discussion of a politics of life, I argued that the problem that remains inherent to these approaches from an ontopolitical perspective concerns the exclusions that their strong metaphysical stance implies. The latter makes them unable to take into account the role that also possible agonism, conflict and momentary dynamics of disruption can play in the opening of possible developments of life. Life and reality are portrayed rather as dynamics that nurture, fuel and reproduce life *necessarily* – almost in a direction stated *a priori*. In other words, there appears to be an assumption upon the positive and affirmative sign in which relations will necessarily develop. The ethics that they suggest remains

[38] A distinction of organicistic and immanent perspectives to life in different categories, in fact, is present in other contributions from the social sciences and cultural studies (Colebrook, 2010; also in Radomska, 2011, 2016) or in philosophy of science (Hoyningen-Huene and Wuketits, 2012). The former, for instance, distinguishes between an active type of vitalism (characterised by a teleological dimension and holistic account of life, particularly pertaining to living organism) and a passive, which instead fosters multiplicity and generativity as defining characteristics (Colebrook, 2010). In an analogous way, Hoyningen-Huene and Wuketits distinguish between a kind of animist or mystic vitalism, which still conceives of life as a metaphysical principle, and a naturalistic and materialist type, whose main element is instead the irreduction of life to any fixed biological law. My analysis tends to side with the second term of these distinctions and establishes a link to biopolitics precisely around the possibility of appropriating knowledge on the biological dimension of life. Nevertheless, the study conducted here moves beyond the objectives and premises of these discussions and looks at the naturalism emerging from Spinozist approaches in particular (Chapter 4).

therefore marked by the same bias of infusing a unidirectional meaning and orientation for action in the world. By equating life and relationality primarily to harmony, love, union or agreement, similar positions neglect the productive element that can derive instead also from moments of partial destitution and disagreement.

As Butler suggests, the affective intensity of life can rather be theorised as more multifarious, ambivalent or multivalent dynamic (Butler, in Blaagaard and van der Tuin, 2014: 21-28). Perspectives of vitalism seem to neglect this other possible side and therefore to lose the enriched potentiality that could be supported by a more multidirectional account of life and relations. In this regard, Weinstein (2016)[39] has suggested to read this move as a misapplication of Hume's naturalistic fallacy, whereby a stringent normative obligation is derived from a single ontological fact.

Therefore, perspectives of vitalism engaged above have the merit of bringing to attention an enlarged domain of life, which takes into account a wider and more encompassing range of entities and beings. Nevertheless, the way in which they articulate the question of the value and qualification of life is still subsumed to the position of a principle, which is, a vital and productive life, that defines the value ascribed to living beings. This ontological principle animating reality produces exclusions and qualifications in the consideration of forms of life that can take part in the political and ethical projects that can be derived from it.

Conclusion

After introducing the debate of biopolitics and the idea of life emerging from it, Chapter 2 moved on to analyse the perspectives of vital-materialism, which seem to stand at the opposite polarity of the schematic of current debates on the politics of life devised in the first part of the thesis. In particular, the analysis has focused attention on the idea of life that perspectives of vitalism uphold, in comparison to the one found in biopolitics. First, I have sought to point out its main constitutive elements and described the idea of life emerging from these perspectives as endowed with enabling, productive and lively capacities. Life is identified with a living force that reproduces and furthers itself by flowing into an interconnected whole across all planetary scales and registers of existence and variously defined as "zoe", life-force or "eco-

[39] Even though Weinstein's argument refers more specifically to Object-Oriented Ontologies (Weinstein, 2016)

philosophy". This has been discussed in the frame of an overall trend here defined as a "vitalist turn" in theory that seems common to many subfields in the social sciences. The overall tendency found in the many discourses that take such direction consists in a deep questioning of the modes of knowledge and experience that have characterised modernity and Western thought, particularly from a standpoint of immanence. Vitalist assumptions lead to a profound reconsideration on the one hand of the perceptual, affective, sensorial and corporeal dimensions of experience, as opposed to the sole rational sphere. On the other hand, moreover, they draw deeper attention on the character of relationality, intertwining and mutual dependency that binds humans to other forms of life in a planetary scale. In other words, they claim for a more genuine recuperation of the dimension of life itself and use this as a starting point to develop their epistemic and ethico-political projects.

These observations have been derived from the diverse sub-groups drawn within the set of vitalisms. I have focused on three sub-streams: the discourse of Gaia (with connection to deep ecology); the idea of living matter and of "thing-power" within some forms of new materialisms and the theory of an eco-philosophy of life-*zoe*. The analysis has also tried to point out the merit of the "vitalist turn" presented. It intimated that the unprecedented epistemic challenge that theories of immanence pose is not to articulate a dispute on the *content* of the norms or rules that should regulate life in this dimension. The dynamism, openness, creativity and productivity of relations that is experienced in a vitalist idea of life require confronting a different kind of norms or rules of conduct, able to acknowledge and embrace the idea of relationality as such.

This point, however, has allowed me to identify also some of the remaining limits within this set of theories. In fact, even though advocating a questioning of norms and values of life as captured in discursive and linguistic representations, they do not fundamentally challenge a qualification among forms of existence and the ensuing attribution of value assigned to life. More specifically, they appear to maintain the division between natural and social domains of life and even extend the normative idea of the human to characterise also other modes of living and being. This derives from the way in which such perspectives characterise life as productive, self-furthering and generative and ascribed a positive sign. They appear to maintain a preliminary assumption that life develops in a productive and enabling direction. Also in this case,

even though in an inverted sign, the value ascribed to life seems to potentially produce an analogous hierarchy and, potentially, exclusion of some forms of living.

The next stages of the research will thus explore an account that challenges the normalising effect of biopolitics on life in an alternative way. It maintains that a more complex account of life not reducible to either of the two perspectives can be seen as already present in Foucault, who appears to acknowledge a positive or productive idea of life as able to respond and resist to power logics. The analysis will explore in particular Foucault's idea of ethics as source for generating an action against power dynamics, which I will attempt at expanding by moving on and recuperating a naturalist system of norms and ideas as emerging from contemporary readings of Spinozian thought. The overall aim is to provide an alternative answer to the politics of life that does not reduce life to a sole object of a power exercised over it or to the sole expression of a power of life, but engages with modes of life beyond pre-given qualifications and categories. This is relevant since it seems to address the exclusions of certain forms of life and the incapacity to grasps their condition, which, has seen, continues to operate problematically in the approaches explored in the schematic in Part I.

Part II | Norm, Life, Singularity: An Ethics

Chapter 3
Foucault's Ethics of Vital Critique

Introduction

The chapters in Part I of the thesis engaged with the treatment of the idea of life in the main debates that are concerned with the relationship between life and politics, namely, biopolitics and vitalism. I demonstrated how they offer two opposite accounts of the qualification of life: a discursive approach that conceives of life as an object of power logics, pertaining to biopolitics explored in Chapter 1, and a perspective which takes life as vital principle capable of its own power, as seen for the vital-materialism explored in Chapter 2. I have maintained that they provide the two approaches that sit at the opposite polarities of the schematic along which current debates around the politics of life can be read. This schematic runs through the ends of a power over life unveiled by biopolitical accounts and a power of life proposed by vitalisms, which ascribes the capacities of agency and productivity to the side of life only, thus underplaying the role of the discursivity of power. I also intimated that, however, vitalism, too, could be seen to result in analogous binary logics and outcomes to the ones highlighted through the literature on biopolitics. Therefore, vitalism seems itself not to sufficiently address the question posed by the thesis regarding how it is possible to re-imagine the qualification of life beyond processes of biopolitical normalisation.

Chapter 3 tries to open up a further path in order to address the question of the meaning of life as relevant for politics. Moving beyond the classification outlined in the first part of the thesis (life as positive and productive and life as controlled and diminished), this stage of the argument maintains that a more comprehensive and receptive account of forms of life beyond biopolitical normalising logics needs to be found in the dynamic ground of the contingent interaction between the vital element of life and the power dynamics that inform it. In order to make this step, I look at Michel Foucault and at the understanding of life and power that emerges from the author. The main reason for returning to Foucault is, first, to highlight that the author's

work seems to imply a much more nuanced, complex and ambivalent idea of life than the one that has been taken on by the literature that has further developed his thought. Along with highlighting the mechanisms in which power becomes progressively exercised through normalisation at the social level, he seems to contemplate a productive and active capacity of life grounded on the materiality of experience and the body, that is presupposed and at the same time escapes the ends of power.

I advance this suggestion by offering a thorough discussion of the concept of *dispositif*, which the author uses to describe the working of mechanisms of power. In my reading, *dispositif* shows how power mechanisms accommodate and, in fact, require, an idea of a productive and responsive capacity of life, which is not captured by biopolitics, and which perspectives of vitalisms assumed as an *a priori* principle. Dispositives provide the structure in which the production of subjectivities takes place, not simply by a unidirectional movement that proceeds from power to modes of life, but in which also active forms of life respond and resist to power. This vital, productive element of life is the space of subjective action and provides room for developing forms of resistance as a critique to power. In advancing this thesis, I also highlight that, in Foucault, exercising forms of critique is connected with a deeply ethical attitude: it is argued that critique to forms of biopower from the perspective of a positive account of life do require ethics. This dimension of analysis will then be further expanded in the next chapters.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first section discusses Foucault's original theorisation of biopolitics and looks at how Foucault deploys the notion of the "norm". The second section then focuses specifically on Foucault's concept of *dispositif*, which appears particularly relevant to capture the co-presence of the two complementary characters of life highlighted above. By capturing the structure in which power logics and subjective formation take place, the idea of the *dispositif* seems to carry a central analytical weight. Section three introduces the notion of "vital" critique to express the forms of responses with which life responds to power dynamics and puts a central emphasis on ethics, seen here as the instrument to enact forms of resistance. The following sections add some clarifications about the idea of subject and subjectivity found in Foucault and on the positioning of Foucault with regard to theories of immanence. In the final section, then I discuss the development seen in Foucault in light of the lesson he himself borrowed from George Canguilhem. Canguilhem explicitly endorsed the capacity of life to generate new norms beyond the

knowledge acquired by power on it and matched this capacity with the expression of a force of existence. This is crucial for my paving the way to a Spinozist naturalist system in the next chapter, where the analysis will look at the effect that the emergence of new ways of being generated within life can hold on the surrounding environment of relations.

Michel Foucault and the shift to modern politics

Michel Foucault tends to be recognised as the first author who popularised the idea of biopolitics and charged the term with its contemporary significance[40]. The author is in fact the first to formulate a coherent theory of how the administration of life becomes the specific mode of governing in modernity. He demonstrates how politics moves away from an idea of power associated primarily with the models of sovereignty and the law and turns into a process of qualification of life by effect of the operation of multiple and intersecting lines of power upon subjects, defined as a "power over life" (Foucault, 1978, 2008). The analysis here wants to put the emphasis also on another dimension of his thought. I argue that Foucault's theory already identifies an idea of the productivity of life beyond the full qualification that is ascribed upon it by regimes of power: this type of life escapes the logics of biopolitical control and reveals a form of material, non-appropriated life able to critically respond to power logics. This appears particularly visible in the part of his work dealing with the concepts of freedom and resistance, which he sees as coexistensive and complementary to biopolitical mechanisms.

The establishment of a "power over life"

Foucault's work on biopolitics can be identified with the intermediate phase of the author's intellectual journey, mostly corresponding to the series of lectures held on the topic and collected in *Society Must be Defended* (2003), *Security, Territory,*

[40] However, it must be noticed that the first use of the term is not Foucault's and the author himself borrows it from previous studies conducted in the area of organicistic theories of the state, which became particularly prominent at the beginning of the 20th century through the work of authors like, primarily, Swede Rudolph Kjellen (see Holdar, 1992; Tunander, 2001). An exploration of the previous debate around interpretations and applications of biopolitics from which Foucault himself draws is not in the interest of the research here (primarily in its organicistic, anthropological and naturalistic interpretations). For a full overview of these discussions see Lemke (2011) and Campbell and Sitze (2013). Moreover, for the analysis of the relation of Foucault's work with these theories and the way it departs from them, I send to the discussion already outlined in the Introduction via Lemke (2011).

Population (2007) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008)[41]. Yet, the ideas developed at this stage cannot be entirely separated from the author's previous enquiry into the archaeology of power-knowledge and systems of truth in an historical dimension (1972). As Campbell suggests (2011, also in Marks, 2006), yet, the roots of the biopolitical theory of Foucault can be already identified in *The Will to Knowledge* (1978). The final chapter of the book, titled "Right of Death and Power over Life", in particular, clearly stresses out a fundamental change that for Foucault marks the starting point of political modernity: the shift from the ideas of sovereignty and the law to that of the *norm* as the main instrument to govern society.

The "shift of regimes" is related to the end of monarchic and absolutist orders at the dawn of modernity. At this point, populations and individuals become less subject to sovereign power and more and more to the effects of regularising and ordering norms (Foucault, 1978). The modern regime of power becomes thus an endeavour of managing and regularising life, by focusing on techniques of organisation and administration, more than on the display and deployment of visible and spectacular measures of sovereign force (Foucault, 1977). In the modern framework, the decision over the death of subjects is no longer consigned entirely to the arbitrary will of the sovereign. The management of life is mainly aimed at avoiding deviations from the normalised order. Governing is thus reconceived as an ongoing process, whereby signs of abnormality are contained and transformed from the beginning by means of regimes of power-knowledge.

In his subsequent lectures, Foucault deals with the theory of biopolitics in a more systematic way. In his analytics of power (2003, 2010), he distinguishes three kinds of power regimes: the juridical power revolving around the law; the disciplinary power concerned with the control of individual bodies and the biopolitical power dealing with the administration of the population as a whole. The latter two kinds are themselves merged into the common category of a disciplinary-biopolitical "power over life" (also in Gane 1986; Schwan and Shapiro 2011).

Disciplinary power targets the anatomical and physical dimension of the body and aims at regulating the everyday actions that define both the private and the productive life of subjects (Foucault 1978). It focuses on the shaping of basic

[41] However, as discussed in the Introduction, it is worth clarifying that, in line with the question analysed by the thesis, my analysis follows the invitation (Fassin, 2010) to return to an exploration of the idea of "life" in Foucault, more than focusing on its subsequent cooptation by analyses on governmentality (Foucault, 2007; Burchell, Gordon & Miller, 1991).`

subjective motions and bodily capacities within a system of minute and efficient control, techniques, mechanisms of conducts and behaviour by means of training and automatisation. The object of discipline is thus the actual, "natural body, the bearer of forces and the seat of duration" (Foucault 1977: 166). A disciplined society is that in which the several institutions that operate in the domains of life can reach a capillary and punctual control of each and every subject, by means of a codification and normalisations of actions and conducts.

The opposite pole, defined as biopower, looks at the population as a set of individuals conceived as "living beings" (Foucault, 2003). More than individualised subjects, biopower targets macro-scale patterns, processes and tendencies that define the life of a community (Foucault 2003: 246). Biopower, therefore, intervenes on the entirety of "life" of the collectivity, which is rendered normalised and, thus, controllable in its characters and variables by processes like testing, examining, measuring, classifying. Both dimensions of disciplinary and bio-power apply to life in its material, corporeal and visible dimension, which becomes the key concern of governmental control (Foucault, 2003: 239).

Overall, the aim of power over life, understood comprehensively across the two modalities, is to achieve a direct reach over the physical-biological life, be that of individuals (disciplinary power) or of collective groups (of the population or communities through biopower) [42]. In the words of the author, biopolitics has "taken control of life in general—with the body as one pole and the population as the other" (Foucault, 2003: 253). With this move, power is thus radically resituated on a dimension of analysis different from that of sovereignty and the formal sphere of the law. Whereas sovereignty was defined by a form of linear, vertical, well-definable power running from the ruling authority to its subjects by means of an explicit and overt law, the new regime of "power over life" implies a more spread, less identifiable, capillary methodology of actual exercise of disciplinary-biopolitical power. This latter sort flows at the edges of formal structures of authority or the state and is found at its ends, in mechanisms, techniques, technologies and discourses that enact controlling

[42] As Lemke (2005) carefully notices, however, a distinction should be made as to the way the two regimes of discipline and of population control realise their outcome. Discipline operates in the mode of an individualisation applied to already existing individuals. On the contrary, population starts from the combination and aggregation "of individualized patterns of existence to a new political form" (Lemke, 2005: 37). "Individual" and population, or "mass", as the two subjects of a "power over life" are not opposite, but rather are the two complementary sides of a global logic of ordering and regularising power. He analyses the case of sexuality to exemplify this complementary role.

practices[43]. In the words of Lemke (2011), repressive power over death is replaced by a power over life that deals less with legal subjects than with actual living beings:

> Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery [*la prise*] it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life [*la prise en charge de la vie*] more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body (Lemke, 2011:37).

The premises put forth in the key short text *The Will to Knowledge*, thus, already point out how (and as effect of what historical processes), the idea of "life itself" emerges as the centre of political strategies. For Foucault, this defines the modern way of exercising power. In this sense, biopolitics cannot simply be considered as an extension or addition to traditional sovereign power. Rather, it constitutes a *qualitatively different* regime, one that transforms the core of power rationales into the management of life at the individual and collective level for the sake of the efficiency of control, and whose aim is that of extracting knowledge about the subjects with the purpose of dominating them.

The shift from the law to the norm

In addition, the shift in regimes of power has an implication also for the kind of laws operating in them. The sovereign action through the juridical sphere of codified laws is gradually supplemented by power mechanisms reaching directly the dimension of life. The complementary spheres of the juridical and the informal proceed hand in hand in harmoniously ordering the society. In this move, the latter form of power becomes organised around the regularising capacity attributed to the "norm". In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault notices

> the growing importance assumed by the action of the norm, at the expense of the juridical system of the law. […] A power whose task is to take charge of life […] effects distributions around the norm. […] The law operates more and more as a norm. A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centred over life (Foucault, 1978:144).

The binding and coercive function once exercised by the sovereign's law is replaced by the logics of domination aimed at the normalisation of life. Norms operate

[43] In this regard, some critics trace a qualitative difference between the stage of the disciplinary and the biopolitical forms of control in terms of the subjectivity and, crucially for my research, of idea of life that they imply (see Blencowe, 2012). I do not follow entirely this reading and I rather treat them as manifestations of the same "power over life", which operates according to the two different and complementary modalities just described.

in a radically capillary and immanent dimension, since they are enacted by the matrix of practices, techniques and discourses that shape the bodily-corporeal existence of their subjects. In this perspective, a radically different form of normativity is in play. As Macherey notices (1992; also in Juniper and Jose, 2008), the norm functions as an immanent cause: it does not pre-exist its own intervention but constantly produces both the *plane* and the *objects* on which it acts[44].

Macherey (1992:176) draws another distinction between two typologies of norms in Foucault: on the one hand, a negative notion that identifies norms with juridical exclusion and forbidding – what coincides with the formal normative function of the law. On the other hand, however, there is also a positive notion in which norms act through a biological process of inclusion and regulation. This second element indicates the presence of a productive character of life that biopolitical norms use to develop and establish themselves, and to ensure their own maintenance and reproduction. Drawing from what Colebrook also comments on a similar point, life can be here defined extensively, as the "basis of the living and the lived, by surveying bodies and living systems" (Colebrook, 2010: 137). These bodies, moreover, themselves function as the cause that nurtures power mechanisms, since they continue to reproduce them in their striving for self-maintenance. Life engaged by biopolitics thus, in Foucault, is not reduced simply to the passive and diminished object of power logics (as discussed in Chapter 1) but has a manifested positive and productive side. Based on this, Foucault provides a comprehensive account of the technologies of power that constitute disciplined and bio-managed bodies. In his account, the aim of modern power is to render bodies docile, compliant, and to operate an all-encompassing regularisation of life both in the sphere of individuals and of the population as a whole (Foucault, 1978).

Under the assumption of the norm and its function in structuring the social body, it is thus possible to comprehend why, in *The Order of Things*, Foucault maintains that, until the 18th century, the "concept of life" did not exist (Foucault, 2002:139)[45]. The idea of life, for him, begins at the dawn of modernity, since only in

[44] It can also be noticed that only the recognition of the working of biopolitical norms in a dimension of immanence can justify the inclusion of this productive and positive element. I will come back to the discussion of Foucault and immanence more specifically in the last section of the chapter.

[45] This claim is used by Tarizzo (2011, 2016) to argue that the very idea of "life" is a modern invention and underpins any philosophical as well as biological study of life. For Tarizzo, life, defined by Foucault as an "untamed (savage) ontology" (Foucault, 2002: 303) defines the very metaphysics of modernity. Even though this discussion goes beyond the scope of the analysis here, it provides a relevant intervention to build and at the same time move beyond Foucault's claims on the subject.

its generative and productive interaction with the norm, does life become meaningful for the purposes of governing (in the form of the management, manipulation and administration of bodies by means of the systems of power-knowledge established upon it). Through this reading, then, Foucault profoundly undermines the idea of life and the body as fixed and closed entity and shows how they remain subject and porous to the effects of relations of power. If the analysis above provides the premises to Foucault's theorisation of norm and life, in what follows I focus on how Foucault develops the idea of the productive character of life to articulate a response to logics of power. This affirmative and positive element finds further explanation through the analysis of Foucault's concept of *dispositif*.

Dispositif and the space for resistance

With the shift from the law to the norm, the administration and control of life operate through the fabric of society and have norms as their key instrument and mode of operation. They operate at the informal, relational level and spread configuration and arrangements of practices and discourses that are well captured by the Foucauldian concept of "dispositifs" (Bussolini, 2010). "Dispositif" expresses the moving articulation of power between technology (and the concrete arrangements of its enactment) and the law. Dispositives establish both the logical and the material possibilities of experience that remain available to the subject in a certain context or point in time. Normalising techniques may appear to define life only as object of a power exercised over it by governmental logics, and thus to treat life primarily as suppressed and as an utterly controlled instance. Being acted upon by a norm means positioning oneself "as a subject in a context of a normalised society which guarantees the efficacy of its laws" (Macherey, 1992:180).

In Foucault's thought (1977, 2003), however, the productive capacity of norms also acquires an alternative direction. Norms imposed by governmental logics do not operate in a vacuum, but generate a response by the life on which they act upon. The author puts an increasing attention on the way in which a subjective element of resistance can be inserted and made systematic in the operation of biopolitical mechanisms. In this way, the subject is no longer seen only as the passive recipient, but in fact plays an *active* part as the author, the craftsman of its own modes and ways of being (Foucault, 2003). There is therefore a fundamental shift, or, more precisely,

an addition, to the directives of power which are at play in processes of subjective formations. By returning to the terminology with which I characterised the forms of power in Part I, I suggest that this can be read as the co-presence of an idea of a power *over* life and a power *of* life, which participate in the shaping and enacting of power dynamics. In order to explain how Foucault paves the way to the idea of a productive force of life in his system, I will thus concentrate on the concept of dispositifs[46].

As Bussolini (2010) notices, dispositives are crucial to characterise Foucault's idea of power in a more distributed and ontological sense (Bussolini, 2010: 87). In curating the translation of Foucault's work where the concept of *dispositif* appears for the first time, Graham Burchell describes them as designating the "configuration or arrangement of elements and forces, practices and discourses, power and knowledge, that is both strategic and technical" (Burchell, 2008: xxiii). I interpret it as the discursive-material structure where both mechanisms of reproduction of the control operated by power as well as responses by life through practices of resistance take place. They capture the configuration of relations between power and life in a certain time and space as result of regimes of power-knowledge. They thus provide the structural "network" informing the spaces and modes of such relations. As also Foucault puts it, they express a "general line of force which transverses local battles and links them together" (Foucault, 1978: 124). Thus, dispositives are primarily responsible for defining the range of possible modes of existence and experience available to subjects at a certain point of time[47]. It follows that also the subjects that are produced by such mechanisms cannot be thought of in terms of stable essences or being, but are always already subject of becoming and open to the changeability and productivity of power dynamics.

[46] Olssen (2008, 2010) seem to run a partially similar enquiry by analysing the idea of discourse. However, my analysis ultimately departs from the author's in two main regards: first, the idea of *dispositif* is fundamentally different to that of discourse, by referring rather to the tactics with which a broader discursive regime is constructed. Moreover, Olssen's focus is primarily on how discourses work historically (and thus his aim is that of distinguishing Foucault from other thinkers like Marx, Hegel and Habermas), whereas my enquiry into the *dispositif* is primarily aimed at discussing the relationship of the latter with the ideas of subjectivity and norms, and the possibility of carving a space for resistance to apparatuses of power. Moreover, both Deleuze (1992c) and Agamben (2009) have discussed this problem, particularly advocating a distinction of the term (both in the translation and in the meaning) from that of "apparatus".

[47] The argument advanced here in regard to the notion of *dispostif* appears similar to the reading that Claire Blencowe (2012) gives of the concept of "experience" in Foucault. "Dispositif" in fact, also captures the structure of the experience that is available to the subject in a certain point of history and time. More specifically, dispositives provide the "structures" through which subjects are produced along with objects through the organisation of domains of experience (Blencowe, 2012: 11). Although my analysis stretches much further and the use of this specific term is primarily meant to establish a connection to the development in Spinoza in what follows, it is anyway worth highlighting this analogy.

This latter aspect becomes particularly crucial when introducing the further element of resistance, which Foucault considers co-extensive to power. It is worth quoting the passages where this notion is introduced by the author. According to him: "as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy" (1988: 123). Foucault's statement asserts that at a time when there is power, there is the possibility of resistance (Fontana and Bertani 2003: 280). Similarly, in "The Subject and Power" (1983), Foucault notices that: "I would like to suggest another way to go further toward a new economy of power relations, a way which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and which implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point" (1983: 210–11). With this intervention, Foucault explicates the relational character of power, which simultaneously generates oppositions to its very operation across a complex network of dispositives (Foucault, 1978: 93).

Power, thus, plays an ambivalent role: it tames and simultaneously generates possibilities for counteraction by those who are subject of its same mechanisms. With this addition, productivity does not remain limited to the polarity of power as the sole point structuring the regimes of existence, but is now shifted to the side of the self and the active role that it can play in changing or maintaining such logics. Given the plural forces shaping the field of power, the enactment of new articulations by subjects is a necessary correlate to the dynamics of controlling power, meaning that the possibility of enacting forms of resistance and freedom is left constantly open. Practices of resistance pertain uniquely to the specific configuration of power relations that generate them. As Lorenzini notices:

> Foucault himself suggests, we should rather speak of practices of freedom, because it is always the singularity and specificity of a given situation, of a certain actual configuration of power relations, which confers a singular and specific form to the effort and the practices of freedom aiming at giving rise to an other conduct. (Lorenzini, 2016:19).

The concept of dispositif is thus crucial in Foucault's theoretical apparatus, since it expresses how both directions of power control and resistance are already present and possible. Dispositives capture the coexistence of both repressive and productive capacities of power. As to the second category of the productive component

of power, it appears split into two forms: one still exercised in the top-down direction of the power's enforcing control on bodies and experiences (in the aim of achieving their regularisation and normalisation) and the other identified with the productive and positive response of subjects, which become able to challenge and intervene actively on the very formation of the norms operated by power.

In the argument developed in the chapter, thus, dispositives function as the structure that defines norm-formation as an operation of controlling power, but simultaneously, with the introduction of practices of resistance, which capture also the space for the emergence of possible different modes of life. Meaningfully, they are tools for analysing and describing the multiplicity of forces and movements through which power in all directions is constantly expressed and performed in a perpetually dynamic social field (Bussolini, 2010: 90)[48].

The latest observations have thus established the positive element that can be found in Foucault and that the analysis of the idea of the *dispositif* helps grasp and conceptualise. In order to further substantiate the characterisation of this kind of life and the types of conduct it generates (that is, the idea of resistance to power logics), the following section expands on this notion. I argue that the source of this resistance expresses an excess of life that strives to affirm itself against power logics. In Foucault, the practices of resistance are expressed through a form of (positive) critique that is enacted by means of ethics. Ethics becomes thus essentially tied up to the vital, material existence that escapes, and, as I try to show, can be deemed prior to the normalising effects that are operated by power on life.

Ethics of the self as vital critique

It is now possible to move a step further in the argument and connect the positive element of life expressed by resistance to power to the notions of ethics and critique that Foucault associates with it. Dissecting how ethics is introduced by Foucault requires looking more closely at how dynamics of power relations operate within each node of the *dispositif*. It is here that an element of resistance is introduced:

[48] This point helps add also another clarification regarding the concept of power in Foucault's work. Quoting the author, this needs to be understood as "the multiplicity of relations of force which are immanent to the domain where they operate, and are constitutive of their organisation; the game which by way of continual battles and confrontations transforms them, reinforces them, inverts them" (Foucault, 1976: 140). Thus, the concept of power in Foucault looks at the wider sphere of power relations as they are found dispersed and suffused in society. Foucault rejects any transcendent origin of power: power needs to be thought of as a constantly open and immanent field and liable to further ruptures, fractures and new constitutions.

dispositives operate not only and no longer as the sole instrument of the application of power, but are also exposed in the limits of their functioning. As found in Foucault:

> We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart (Foucault 1978: 100)[49].

Nathan Widder (2012) provides a most clear analysis of the dissection of the lines of power active at any node of the *dispositif*. A first movement concerns the formation of disciplines and techniques by the controlling authority from which action is ushered. A second and connected line of the exercise of power, then, consists of the way in which these practices are managed and maintained after their establishment (Foucault, 2010). These more apparent logics, however, are supplemented by a third dimension, which can be identified with the structures in which individuals come to recognise themselves as subjects embedded in disciplinary and biopolitical discourses. Knowledge/power is no longer ushered by the authority and exercised over those subjected to it. Rather, it concerns the relation that one maintains with oneself. For Foucault, this consists in an ethical stance whereby "the individual constitutes and recognises himself *qua* subject" (Foucault, 1978: 6). One critically positions oneself in regard to the modes of normalisation and standardisation operated by power. It amounts, thus, to a form of critique. To quote Povinelli commenting on this aspect, Foucault sketches

> a theory of critique as particular stance (ethics) against statistical reduction of life rather than as any specific normative proposition (morality) about the content of what the good life is or might be. If, for Canguilhem, all things that gamble against the inert and entropic are life, for Foucault all that resists the uniformity of existence are critique" (Povinelli, 2016: 97).

I will return to the reference to Canguilhem and to how his version of vitalism can be applied to the idea of "resistant life" in the next section. At this stage, my aim is to suggest that the critical attitude with which the self responds to power logics captures the vitality and productivity of life that is not reducible to the technologies of

[49] Even though Foucault uses the term of discourses here, I argue that applying this analysis to the wider structure of the *dispositif* is legitimate, since, as seen in the definition of *dispositif* above, discourses are part of the operation of dispositives.

power aiming at controlling it. I argue that the reference to this element of life reveals a vitalist element present in Foucault's theory which appears irreducible to the sole discursive dimension in which life acquires meaning as effect of a socio-cultural construction. Significantly, the endorsement of this vital element in Foucault is connected and requires a practice of ethics, as the critical positioning of oneself with regard to relations of power. It can then be suggested that biopolitics in the formulation that Foucault gives contains a vitalist component of life and this is captured by the dimension of ethics that supports critique, as also Povinelli defines it.

In her analysis of the concept of experience in Foucault, Claire Blencowe (2012) uses the term of "positive" critique to charcaterise the forms of responses by the self – even though the author does not pay direct attention to the dimension of ethics in her analysis. The attribute of "positive" captures precisely the productive capacity of life which is implied by the biopolitical experience of the subject. It expresses the assumption that the idea of a positive and vital character of life is entailed by biopolitical mechanisms and by how power generates productive responses and capacities. I here follow this qualification and adopt the term "vital" critique, which, in my argument, is closely connected to the presence of a vitalist idea of life in the working of mechanisms of power. As I will return to briefly below, moreover, the use of the adjective "positive", or vital, also allows me to distinguish Foucault's account from other theories and perspectives of critique in political theorising (see Andrejevic, 2013).

To return to Foucault's idea of ethics, the observations above are further supported by the subsequent work by the author. In the interview collected in "The Ethics of the Care for Self as a Practice of Freedom" (1997), Foucault points out that "there has been a sort of shift: these games of truth no longer involve a coercive practice, but a practice of self-formation of the subject" (Foucault, 1997: 282). This implies a transformation in the subjective attitude: from a pure object of discourses of power, the subject becomes itself the actor of its own self-definition and self-forging. Deploying the terminology that is introduced further on in the same work, there appears to be a change from a purely "passive" subjective mode, which is made object of a certain discourse (the treatment of categories like the "mad" or the "prisoner" are the most exemplary in this sense, Foucault, 1977, 2013) to an "active" kind of subject, which critically positions itself against power institutions and logics.

The mentioning of the subject's "activity", however, does not necessarily imply a reference to open actions or deeds. Rather, it refers to a more profound state of "an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being" (Foucault, 1997: 282). What defines the practice of ethical self-formation does not simply coincide with an ethical action. Ethics turns into a deeper attitude or disposition that must constantly apply to the individual, and must be continuously cultivated, practiced and exercised across all spheres of existence. "Ethical" shifts therefore from a predicate attributed to exterior actions – and often codified by a set of norms or rules – to a mode of *being*, a way of existence, which is indistinguishable and inseparable from the subject that embodies it. The conception of ethics, therefore, becomes primarily associated to a disposition that one acquires.

The author names such process as a constant practice of a subjective "care for the self" (Foucault, 1990: 73, 211). Care for oneself identifies the set of techniques and practices through which the subject defines its own relationship with the surrounding environment, responding to the effects of power (Foucault, 2011: 45-54). The assumption of an attitude of care for the self is therefore primarily a highly relational practice, which can be generated and developed only in response to the concrete set of relations and configuration of dynamics in which one finds herself embedded[50].

The author defines the sphere of the ethical as one's attempt "to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being" (Foucault, 1997: 282). Drawing from ancient ethics, for him, this space requires a margin of freedom, where one can conceive of oneself as amenable to self-formation and self-fashioning beyond coercive practices. In its careful embodiment and exercise, care for the self, understood as the form that ethics takes, becomes thus an instrument of escape and reversal of power, since it makes it possible to limit and contrast its effects.

Foucault describes this attitude of "care for the self" as a work of art or an art of existence. Elsewhere, he describes it as "those intentional and voluntary actions by

[50] Significantly, in his latest analysis, Foucault links these reflections around ethics to practices of ancient ethicality. Several references to both the Greek and the Roman world recur, which look both at specific philosophies (the Stoics in particular, but also the Cynics, at a later stage, 2011; also in Prozorov, 2017) as well as to concrete socio-political modes of collective organisations (like the ways of citizens' living in the community or the *polis*). From the reference to the ancient world, the author borrows the link that he traces between ethics conceived as a fundamental care of oneself across all dimensions of one's life and the experience of freedom. I will explain below why I do not look at this particular phase of Foucault's work in my argument.

which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being" (Foucault, 1978:11). It is significant that Foucault makes reference to process of *transformation*, accomplished through a constant activity of crafting and recrafting of the self, and ultimately aimed at minimising the spaces and possibilities of domination by power. Practices of self-formation, therefore, are still partially conditioned by the external structures, but also save a space for individual liberty. Meaningfully, Foucault defines freedom as the "ontological condition of ethics" (Foucault, 1978). It allows a space that is not subject to previous determination and therefore leaves open the question of *how to live*.

Practices of resistance and freedom are thus deeply intertwined with the dimension of ethics. Moreover, ethics itself contributes to enhance freedom when it is practiced as a work of self-liberation and formation, in order to free oneself from the normalising logics of power and to realise a harmonious relation with oneself, and, consequently, with others. At this point of the analysis, I want to emphasise that practices of resistance as envisioned by Foucault start precisely from the bodily and affective dimension and aim at subtracting oneself from the control of power. This (counter)conduct, then, critically interacts with the practices and discourses that shape an environment and system of relations. I will return to this point in the next Chapter when expanding Foucault's conclusions with some aspects of the naturalism found in contemporary Spinozist approaches.

Furthermore, the analysis advanced above also opens up an observation with regard to the role and the function of morality (Foucault, 2007). Drawing from the quote of Povinelli above (2016), morality can itself be considered as a regime of truth, which is established, transmitted and embedded in the set of institutions and practices that shape life. Morality, thus, plays the role of an external force, which analogously to other modes of power, is imposed on the individual to influence and shape its conduct. Therefore, if morality fulfils the function of a certain discourse of truth, then the ethical work on the self needs to operate on a radically different level from the former. The ethical that is embodied by a subject in processes of self-fashioning becomes a force, which is complementary – and, possibly, stands in productive friction – with morality.

Some critics (Colebrook, 2010) read the formulation of the biopolitical regime by Foucault as the statement that morality itself may be no longer possible. Whereas a precise and commonly shared moral code establishes clear conceptions of good or bad

– which affirm themselves as natural properties within a certain truth regime – what decides about the conducts adopted by the self is rather the interstice left to the ethical. The individual is ultimately determined by its turning on itself through processes of self-formation, that open up new possibilities for experimentation and development. This reveals the space of freedom where the subject can subtract itself from the direct effects of power. As Foucault again highlights: "ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection" (Foucault, 1997: 184). All these points will be crucial to establish a continuity between the account here provided and the idea of ethics in what follows.

In this understanding, ethics corresponds therefore to a deeper mode of *being*, which captures a disposition, a comprehensive attitude of one individual towards oneself and one's surrounding. This approach also recalls an interpretation of ethics as defined by the collapse of the distinction between fact and law. Ethics concerns the manner in which one forms oneself as a subject, of how one conducts oneself in response to a certain historical and material situation but also in order to carve out a space of freedom within it. In this sense, ethics is understood as concerned with the cultivation of the self as a "singular being" which subtracts itself from the normalisation involving patterns of behaviour and standardisation. The latter point around the situating of the singular self with regard to external systems of laws and norms can be given further attention.

The subject and the singularity of experience

One of the key points that can be advanced in regard to the analysis just performed applies to the centrality that the ideas of the self and the subject still play in Foucault's theorisation. Even though Foucault problematises the modern vision of politics grounded on the idea of the autonomous individual (Foucault, 1972), it could still be argued that, in the very description of biopolitical apparatuses, and particularly disciplinary ones, the idea of power in Foucault still gives centrality to the subject and the individual. In order to clarify this possible objection, I will complete the analysis just put forth in relation to the idea of *dispositif* and particularly the practices of resistance through ethics by looking at the compelling argument advanced by Macherey in regard to the subject in Foucault, which also opens up to considerations

on the surrounding system of relations, that will become even more central in my analysis of Spinozism in the next chapter.

In some of his essays dedicated to Foucault's ethics and subjectivity, Pierre Macherey (1992, 1998) suggests that the idea of the subject in Foucault should always be interpreted as possible at the *limit*. By this, he means that the self recognises itself as partaking in a double order of existence. On the one hand, the subject is part of a certain order produced by the configuration of mechanisms of power, knowledge, truth-regimes and thus perceives itself as part of such operations. However, by complying with these truth games and thus subjecting itself to power logics, it also does not identify entirely with this order. In other words, the individual becomes aware of something subjective, that pertains to its unique condition as a singular being and that carves out the space for resistance, and therefore, enables the realisation of the space of freedom that has been highlighted above.

What is relevant for my argument here is that Macherey uses the specific term of "singularity" to characterise this condition. The term captures the double dynamic whereby one sees oneself as both part of a certain broader order, but also as partly detached and distinguished from it, and capable of a mode of existence that is not exhausted simply in the compliance to power logics. "Singularity" is the unique term that helps express the relation between the being of one entity and its surrounding milieu or environment, in a way that simultaneously captures the specificity of the self and the broader context in which the latter is inserted, in a relational sense[51].

As seen above, the space in which the self positions itself in regard to the surrounding system of power relation is the space for the ethical. Macherey defines it as the space for the "elaboration of a form of relation to itself that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct" (Macherey, 1992: 99). This captures precisely what I have analysed in the previous section with regard to techniques of the self and Foucault's ethics. It needs to be specified however that here ethical does not refer to the compliance with external and given sets of rules. Rather, in this context, ethics pertains precisely to the critical positioning of oneself in regard

[51] A similar point on the possibility for the subject to find a genuine space for free agency and creativity is discussed also by Olssen (2008), in a piece analysing Foucault's work in light to the more recent developments in complexity theory. Moreover, the author develops the analysis by making reference to the debate between Foucault and Chomsky in 1979, which, significantly for my research, is one of the only two instances in which Foucault makes a direct reference to the work of Spinoza (see also Chomsky, 2011).

to those rules, with the possibility of resisting them by means of practices of positive critique.

I previously made a reference to the relationship between ethics and morality to try to exemplify this point. The same dual dynamic can be expanded and applied to the very operation of thinking more broadly. Macherey argues that, for Foucault, to think is always to think about a system of norms, not for the purpose of legitimising or justifying them, but, to a certain extent, to challenge them and highlight what is wrong with them, especially in regard to the self and its possible experience (Macherey, 1992: 100-101). By thinking, the subject can thus open up a space for intervention that challenges the established system of norms. However, this intervention takes place not in any point outside the system, but *inside* the system, and in fact, it is generated by it. This happens because of the subject's taking a critical and yet positive position in regard to the existent system of rules, and thus carving out the space to free oneself (at least partially) from them.

The solution that Foucault provides is thus to work on certain practices of the self as a way to cultivate this self-awareness of one's own situation in regard to the largest system of relations of power. They act on the relation that the self as singularity maintains with the broader set of power dynamics. In this regard, the self must be seen not only as the passive subject that is entirely produced by power logics, but as itself contributing to the maintenance and continuous reproduction of the latter. Significantly, and following from the point above, the self can create a space for thinking *differently*, and challenge established ways of thinking starting from its own experience.

The experience of the subject in Foucault is thus interpreted as always situated at the margin or at the "limit". Significantly, Blencowe (2012) returns to a similar idea by arguing that the experience of the subject is tied to life and to the transgression of limits: processes of subjectification and resistance are produced by the critical situating of the self in regard to norms. That means, Foucault attaches experience to the epistemic and ethical enterprise of questioning oneself as the sole result of dynamics of power. This consists in exercising one's own power of action as a singularity with regard to the (universal) norm. In this regard, the self is not entirely object of a power over and completely appropriated by the system of truth-knowledge in which the norm of power is established, but also is not the sole expression of its own power of life freed from any external conditioning. The practice of critique highlighted above has

the function of questioning the subject's relation to both itself and the system of norms in which one is situated. Quoting Foucault in this regard, critique as ethics is something "that permits a change, a transformation of the relationship we have with ourselves and with the world where, up to then, we had seen ourselves as beings without problems […] a transformation of the relationship we have with our knowledge" (Foucault, 2000: 244). The latter points to the knowledge that is derived from regimes of truth-power that work towards the formation and the constitution of the subject. Ultimately, by his or her own experience, the subject can problematise such knowledge and thus challenge the structures of power that use knowledge to exercise forms of control.

It is also possible to spell out the kind of knowledge through which mechanism of control by power are exercised. In his theorisations on biopolitics, Foucault certainly has in mind primarily forms of biological knowledge, through which power tries to appropriate and gain control over forms of life either through disciplines or through the control of the population as a whole (by means of statistical data on the variables of life). However, with the development of experience and practices of resistance, it is also possible to show how life fundamentally escapes the laws of living being as they are known and understood by means of contemporary biological knowledge only. The very formation of human subjectivity is thus driven in a process of radically moving beyond the known limits of the experience defined within the power matrix, of transgressing these limits and generating new modes of existence.

As I will shortly expand by looking at Canguilhem, the challenge to existent systems of norms needs to be initiated from the point of view of the limit, of the margin, of the error of life as what exceeds and escapes the known boundaries of the established norm, thus challenging it and, possibly, bringing about something new. This explains why the idea of the subject in Foucault can already be closely compared to that of a singularity which is always active at the margin, at the limit of seeing oneself as driven by forms of self-expression and, simultaneously already relating to the wider environment.

Significantly for my analysis, Foucault argues that "The fact that man lives in a conceptually structured environment does not prove that he has turned away from life […] just that he lives in a certain way, that he has relationship with his environment such that he has no set point of view towards it, that he is mobile" (Foucault, 2000: 475). The point around the connection with the surrounding environment and the fact

that the production of concepts is not ultimately separated from the subjective life and experience is close to what will be pointed out in regard to possibilities of action in the "ecosystem of thought" that I will elaborate in regard to a Spinozist system[52].

Ultimately, when ethics is turned into a constant practice to be cultivated and enacted, there is no distinction between concept and the experience of life, since the enterprise of formation of concepts and knowledge is already immanent to life. Knowledge organises and distributes dimensions, horizons and possibilities of experience. Moreover, as demonstrated through the reading of the concept of *dipositif*, knowledge is itself reproduced and maintained by the way in which life responds to these operations. Knowledge, therefore, cannot be seen as external or imposed upon life from any external dimension, but is immanent to life and to its norms and functioning. Therefore, there is no distinction between concepts and experience of life, but the two are co-extensive and mutually reproducing[53].

The idea of singularity bridges the gap between a "vital" idea of life as something that is not individualised but still practiced at the level of the individual (in the form of resistance). Singularity help trace this connection by applying to the individual subject and the processes of subjective formations through resistance, but simultaneously implying the context in which subjective experience is situated, in relational terms.

At this stage, however, it could still be argued that, if it is true that the operation of challenging norms and transformation takes place within the system, this is still very much centred around the self and its own way of being within structures of power. In better terms, if there is scope for one to form and work on the self, a much lesser concern seems to be put by Foucault on the possibility of producing change also in one surrounding environment (Lorenzini, 2016). Crucially, in his essay titled "What is Critique?" (1996), the author explicitly declares that:

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[52] The latter point also proves how Foucault's idea of life and his use of it remain fundamentally different from the understanding of the philosophies of life analysed in Chapter 2, which considered conceptual structures and representations as a hinder to life - as seen in the overview of the "vitalist turn" in social sciences in Chapter 2.

[53] In this regard, it could be objected that Foucault reaches exactly this apex at the latest stage of his work, when exploring ascetic practices, in which he searches for a coincidence of life and truth (understood not as a concept, but as a living truth). However, as I have already pointed out, the reason why I do not look at this part of the author's work specifically is that at the latter stage, the question and concern seem no longer political. In other words, the solution offered by Foucault in the last stage of his work does no longer interrogate how to deal or respond to relations of power, but rather is concerned with cutting existence outside relations of power altogether (what could be defined the search for an "unpolitical" life, see Viriasova, 2013, 2018 on this concept). My exploration, on the contrary, is still concerned with the "politics of life" and with modes in which life relates to power (even though not in confrontational and oppositional terms).

> I would therefore propose a very first definition of critique, this general characterization: the art of not being governed quite so much" (Foucault, 1996: 390)

I will attempt the further step of expanding on ways to seeking change of the surrounding environment of norms starting from the affective and relational position of the self by moving on to a materialist system of ideas put forth by contemporary readings of Spinoza. The continuity between the level of the self and the surrounding environment – and the capacity of the subject to affect the latter – will be investigated and enquired by looking at the expansion of Foucault's ethics, which introduces possibilities of new modes of living, through Spinozist naturalist theories. In order to do so, though, another step of analysis is required. I argue that an exploration of the thought of Georges Canguilhem can help me further unpack and explain the vital and positive element of life that I read in Foucault's theory and how the latter is tied to the generation of norms. I will turn to Canguilhem in the final section of the chapter.

Before moving on, I would like to point out an additional reflection in regard to the use of the term "critique" here. Many commentators have discussed this point and would object the very use of the term critique in the context of biopolitics and the literature engaged here more broadly (Andrejevic, 2013). The attribute of "positive", or, specifically in my reading, "vital", distinguishes the account provided here from more "classic" understandings of critique in social theory emblematically addressing "*the* social problem" of injustices and inequalities. In biopolitics, the latter is deemed to be fragmented in a myriad of multiple – and, thus, often seen as problematic – range of social problems (Andrejevic, 2013: 227). Blencowe suggests that the idea of biopolitics captures the diversity of power relations characteristic of modern societies, which does not deny but rather *supplements* the modes and concerns of traditional social critique, particularly Marxian (Blencowe, 2012: 12). This short observation is meant to make a point on the function of critique in Foucault and the way it relates to other analyses of critique in political theorising. This is possibly only a secondary layer to the study here centred around the question of the qualification and politics of life. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing this out since it will relate to a similar observation in the argument advanced with regard to contemporary Spinozism and finally in the

last chapter, when enquiring the political significance of the ethical approach elaborated here[54].

Foucault and the immanence of the norm

I have previously demonstrated that, in my reading, the concept of *dispositif* is crucial for paving the way to an affirmative opening towards an idea of an inherent force of life present in Foucault's thought. As Macherey so effectively puts it when looking at the function of norms in Foucault, this starts suggesting the idea of the immanence of the norm. The norms that regulate life are not exterior to their field of application, that is, of the actions that they aim to inform. Norm cannot be interpreted as a cause acting externally to its effects or applying to a field of reality that pre-exists its intervention. Rather, it operates in a plane of complete immanence: it orders its normative function only gradually while being exercised and thus taking into account the subjective responses that are productively and positively opposed to it (Macherey, 1992). Foucault's idea of the norm as shaped through dispositives is thus fundamental to reflect on its immanent functionality, which admits an affirmative force of life as constitutive element.

The point just suggested is related to the reinterpretation of the very idea of causality in immanence. Juniper and Jose (2008:7) define immanence as the plane where the very idea of causality dissolves, since the cause is already contained in its effects, or, in better terms, the cause is taken to be immanent with the effect. This implies the abandonment of the very possibility of an outside to immanence. Everything that happens in immanence is generated and produced within such plane in a state of deep entanglement. The entire dimension of being is thus flattened in one horizon, which plays the role of both theatre of continuous production but also of the object which is generated (Toscano, 2006).

In fact, many authors have discussed the role that Foucault plays in marking the shift from a transcendent to an immanent historical idea of life. Hardt and Negri

[54] Along with my reference to Blencowe, I shall also highlight how my argument fundamentally departs from her in many regards. In fact, Blencowe's account runs the opposite risk of putting too much emphasis on the way in which biopolitical rationality is directed to "the generation, manifestation, protection and the deferral to, life, vitality, creativity, spontaneity" (Blencowe, 2012: 16). By so doing, she risks neglecting that these dynamics are not unique, but rather *complementary* to the repressive side of power that I demonstrated above. I maintain that the *thanatopolitical* logics embedded in biopolitical rationale remain present and cannot be ultimately be downplayed from an analytical or a normative standpoint. Nevertheless, hers remains a useful formulation not to limit the analysis of biopower to its repressive action and rather acknowledging its positive and productive character, which functions as the space where alternative possibilities for forms of life can emerge and be investigated.

highlight that Foucault's rejection of transcendence is endowed of a revolutionary impulse that leads him to the rediscovery of a radical plane of immanence (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Their reading confirms what has been argued here that, particularly when using the developments in biopolitics to introduce possibilities of self-creation and experimentation, Foucault's aim is not a resignation vis-à-vis the loss of absolute and transcendent truths. Rather, he wants to look for the possibility of a revolutionary force that is entirely located in the immanent plane of living practices, starting from the dimension of the body and of corporeal existence. By so doing, he not only proves wrong any religious or metaphysical origin ascribed to the meaning of life. He also discredits universalising assumptions that are associated with the very ideas of humanity and of Man (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 91). The latter in fact, only apparently seem to debunk naive beliefs around a religious supernatural origin of the human nature. In concrete, it merely creates the illusion of transferring the divine principle to the assumption of universal human freedom and autonomy.

Foucault thus succeed in rearticulating the meaning of life in a radically worldly dimension (1972; 2002; 2011). The author's prime concern is to retreat from an understanding of life as derived from an authority or principle outside of the production of life itself, be it either a divine law or the rule of reason (Widder, 2012: 142). Conversely, the author reverses this starting point and takes the biological dimension as the defining ground for a mundane understanding of life (Foucault, 1978; 1983), focused on the biological and bodily dimension and the way in which they are constructed and regulated by mechanisms of power. This passage, moreover, is projected beyond the individual level and applied to the intersubjective dimension of society in order to explain the mechanisms of governing of the population as a whole (Foucault, 1978).

The same movement towards immanence, moreover, can be read in the relationship between ethics and morality which I referred to above. As suggested, in the biopolitical analysis by Foucault, morality would itself stand as one of the forms of power and knowledge aimed at regularising life and subjecting it to their control. Ultimately, a stable set of moral norms would itself be part of mechanisms of biopolitics. This is also the reason why the ethical response that the author envisions needs to be played at a different level, that is, in the domain of the relation that the self maintains with oneself, in order to produce forms of resistance and the experience of freedom. This kind of ethics, explained as tactics of the self and aimed at reducing the

level of domination as much as possible, could therefore never coincide with given and established moral rules.

It is possible to make a deeper reflection about theories of immanent life in regard to Foucault's rearticulation of the role of ethics against a given morality. The ethical approach introduced by Foucault is also clearly situated in a perspective of immanence, by moving away from the idea of the very possibility of establishing any clear and overtly shared set of codes (see again Povinelli, 2016: 97). This highlights a broader reflection on the conditions of thinking of an ethics in a perspective of immanence. The latter is not shaped along a clear and defined set of rules captured by a shared morality or absolute values embedded and expressed by institutional practices. Rather, it is transferred to the ethical work of continuous self-formation, which enables to express the character of life beyond power constraints. The outcome of an action is not decided prior to the action itself, but depends on the contingent and situated conditions that are singularly experienced in one's specific location. This operation expresses and acts upon life and saves a space for freeing it beyond the effects of power control. This will be further expanded in the context of the material naturalism found in the philosophy of the contemporary Spinozist turn.

Canguilhem and the "error" of life

The section above tried to demonstrate that a vital idea of life is present in Foucault's work, and, in many regards, can be considered part of his developments around the idea of critique, resistance and power (see also Piasentier, 2018 on Foucault's double approach to biopolitics). In order to substantiate the argument around the complex and ambivalent understanding of life in Foucault, and particularly the capacity of life to escape the norms of power, I will shortly go back to the work of Georges Canguilhem and his studies around life in a specific biological perspective. Canguilhem played a pre-eminent role in laying the foundations to the contemporary philosophy of science in the 20th century, and certainly had a strong influence in inspiring the idea of productive life in Foucault. Looking at Canguilhem helps me further clarify the use in which the term vitalism can be understood in reference to Foucault and why it is possible to establish a connection between the latter and the theory of Spinozism in the following chapter.

Canguilhem is possibly the first author who offers analytical reflections on the concept of life and on the way in which modern biology has enabled the emergence of this field of research. In many respects, Canguilhem can himself be considered a vitalist thinker[55]. He initially defines vitalism as an account that refuses to conceive of life in mechanical terms and sees living phenomena as fundamentally irreducible to principles of sciences like physics or chemistry (see Benton, 1974; Lenoir, 1982; Hoyningen-Huene and Wuketits, 2012: 9-10). Thus, and significantly for my research, he has a very particular take on vitalism and describes the latter approach not so much as an essentialisation or reification of life, but rather invites to treat vitalism itself primarily as an *ethical* principle. Rejecting an account of life as emerging from modern biology and identified with either a fixed finality or an organicist order and totality, according to Canguilhem, life itself should be considered as a normative activity. Ultimately, the reason for looking at the work of Canguilhem is that he demonstrates how vitalism can work as an intellectual and ethical standpoint, more than and before a factual positive philosophy of life – of the like of the approaches explored in Chapter 2. It is in this second meaning that I deploy the definition of "vital" life in regard to what discussed above in Foucault.

Such understanding is important because, in the first place, Canguilhem's position takes distance from any essentialising reading of the idea of life itself[56]. Rather, for him, vitalism indicates that life is traversed and subjected to organic laws that can never be reduced to sole physical and biological explanation (in a variant that could be called as "naturalistic vitalism" or "material vitalism", as defined by Hoyningen-Huene and Wuketits, 1989). Consequently, vitalism can and needs to be thought of in a strictly historical dimension: across the epochs and specifically in relation to the development of biological sciences, vitalism has worked as the (negative) term of reference against which biological thought and techniques have progressed. In other words, biological knowledge could develop only as a science of the specificity of life and of living beings, which at any point in time has escaped attempts to entirely regularise and appropriate it. From the latter point, it derives that

[55] In fact, some critics have labelled his work as a "polemical vitalist" (distinguished thus from the "animist" strand of this approach, see note below). This well capture the regulative, critical and normative character of his work, which does not attempt to formulate a positive ontology of life. See Greco (2005), Hertogh (1987).

[56] Some commentators have suggested to consider the latter variety of vitalist thought as a form of "animism", Hoyningen-Huene and Wuketits, 1989: 9). However, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, also some of the current developments of neo-vitalism seem to reach a similar outcome, to an extent. For a broader classification of theories of vitalism and their use in the 19th century, see Benton (1974).

a vitalist character cannot be considered as absolute and unchangeable reality, but is rather liable to the evolution of the very idea of life in time. As Monica Greco suggests (2005), vitalism also forces to look at life in a diachronic dimension: its function is to point to a motor force, that, while not identifiable in fixed and absolute terms, opposes tendencies towards reductionist explanations.

Related to the latter point is the notion of "error", which leads Canguilhem to speak of the "vitality of vitalism" (Canguilhem, 2008, 2012; Gutting, 2002; Greco, 2005): biological sciences have been able to make advancements precisely because an element of life constantly escapes rational definition. In fact, biological knowledge could progress only insofar as "the problem of the specificity of life and of the threshold it marks among all natural beings was continually thrown back as a challenge" (Canguilhem, 1989: 18). Importantly, then, vitalism indicates a normative direction for thinking about life: on the one hand, it points to the specificity of living beings. Secondly, it intimates that these forms of living themselves can never be entirely subsumed to systems of appropriation and knowledge, especially of the kind that biological sciences aim at providing. To put it in the words in which the problematic of the thesis has been formulated, they cannot be assigned given and fixed categories and qualifications.

The latter account thus speaks directly to the problem and objectives that an approach of biopolitics sets up, by aspiring to establish regimes of domination on modes of (human) living by means of the biological knowledge that can be acquired about them. Knowledge is here seen as *co-extensive* with error: it "undoes the experience of life, seeking to analyse its failures" (Canguilhem, 2008: xviii). The strive to engage with life that continuously escapes possibilities of absorption and reduction to systems of understanding can thus open up avenues for new non-sovereign knowledge that escapes the domination by power regimes (Strausz and Zevnik, 2013). Vitalism, thus, conceived primarily as an ethical disposition and attitude, amounts to a form of resistance to any reductionist attempts. It invites to think of life as always excessive to any possibility of reducing and subsuming it to any positive knowledge, not as a factual assertion on life but as a *regulative principle* that allows one to think of new modes of being.

Thus, by framing his work on life in terms of a discussion of the "error" that pertains to life (well captured by the dichotomy of the normal and the pathological, Canguilhem, 2012), Canguilhem enables us to reframe the very understanding of what

should be understood as "normal" and pathological states of life, against the positivist accounts of health and disease dominant at his time. "Normal" is not identified with what is established by the data gathered by the positive sciences. Rather, "normal" expresses the movement whereby life establishes and expresses itself *despite* and *regardless* of this scientific and statistical knowledge: it is the manifestation of the "error" which affirms itself despite attempts to know or dominate it. It is worth quoting at length a passage from Povinelli (2016), who provides a most accurate and beautiful description of this point in her analysis of Canguilhem:

> Canguilhem rejects the idea that what was normal about any particular organism could be found in a set of the statistical distribution defining its kind. What is normal about organic life is not defined by how close or distant the individual is from the statistical norm of its species […]. What is normal about an organism, and about organic life is an indwelling capacity and drive to seek to establish the norms that would allow to persist and expand its powers of existence. Life is creative striving (*conatus*) to maintain and expresses its capacity to establish norms (*affectus*), not the reduction of its being to a set of quantitative data (Povinelli, 2016: 96)

With Canguilhem, the ideas of the normal and normality, thus, become entirely redefined against the dominant assumptions coming from the biological and mechanical sciences of its time. Moreover, the definition of the norm of life becomes now explicated as expression of the affective dimension and of a striving as a *conatus*. I maintain that, through the analysis of Canguilhem, it is now possible to explicate the idea of the excess of life that I pointed out above in relation to Foucault and that feeds into practices of resistance. Resistance, which corresponds to an escape from power, derives precisely from this striving impulse of life, a conatus that escapes any exterior attempt to representation and appropriation, and is driven in its mere existence by its own norms. Actions of resistance thus are generated by a material and affirmative impulse of life, yet, the latter is not simply affirmed *a priori*, but it continuously interacts – and escapes – dynamics of power. Even though it might be counterintuitive to move from Foucault back to Canguilhem, I argue that this move is necessary and productive in order to unpack and explicate the vitalist element that is implied by the theory of Foucault. In order to further discuss the affective capacity of life to generate its own norms as expression of its own striving for existence, and why this need is regarded as ethical, I will then turn to a Spinozist theory of ethics and naturalism.

With his analysis and contrast between the two perspectives highlighted, moreover, Canguilhem brings to light a shift in the purposes of the sciences of life that was occurring with the emergence of statistical and positivistic sciences of the population (in fact contrary to vitalist assumptions): he shows how the question and the scientific interest in the study of life progressively ceases to be a concern for life self-preservation in vital, biological and organic terms. Rather, the attention on life becomes a question on the norms regulating it. As Nikolas Rose clearly highlights in a masterful piece on Canguilhem's work, "the productivity of Canguilhem's reflections on norms in life lies less in his insistence on the vitality of life than on the light that it sheds on the character of those other norms that traverse our culture" (Rose, 2006a: 164). More specifically, Canguilhem demonstrates that "Normativity (of life) now becomes a matter of normality, of social and moral judgments about whether particular lives are worth living" (Rose, 1998: 165). This seems to summarise and capture precisely what has been highlighted in Chapter 1 about the qualification of kinds of life and their positioning in regard to the interest of power. The knowledge obtained about life is no longer aimed primarily at safeguarding or ensuring the preservation of life itself, but rather at *regularising* and *normalising* modes of existence and making them controllable under the effects of power logics.

By so doing, Canguilhem thus demonstrates that the oscillation between fact and value is never fixed and defined in absolute terms. Rather, according to his view, it stems from a "dynamic polarity" between the normal and the pathological, between a standard and a deviant account of forms of existence. This means that rather than considering forms of life as a matter of fact defined outside a historical and temporal account, distinctions of facts and values are produced by the discursive practices in which they are inscribed. In other words, there is no neutral ground to define the distinction between natural and qualified life, but rather the practices exercised over life themselves produce the way in which life is qualified and accounted for.

The latter point reinforces what I have illustrated in my analysis of the normalisation of forms of life by biopolitical systems of domination examined in Chapter 1. Most crucially for my argument, however, the passage through Canguilhem's theory demonstrates that in order to establish mechanisms of appropriation and regulation, an element of "error", of vital conception of life must constantly exceed biopolitical regimes. Canguillem's theory thus proves not only that a natural life is always already co-present to the regulated life of norms or *bios*. It also

shows that natural life needs to be conceived as active and productive, as always potentially escaping the logics of biopolitics, and cannot be reduced only to their passive and negative correlative entirely produced by effect of power logics. Yet, life also escapes the possibility of fully grasping and qualifying it. It thus requires the search for an alternative way to engage with it, beyond the grasp of systems of knowledge and qualifications.

The account given by Canguilhem also supports the criticism against the literature on vitalism examined in the previous chapter and the need for differentiating between the two. I make the case that the idea of vitalism used here should not be conceived as a positive and substantive philosophy of life. Rather, vitalism works as a *regulative* and normative principle: the assumption of acting "as if" possibilities of life always escape the capacity of systems of power-knowledge to regulate and appropriate them provides the starting point to search for forms of escape or resistance to power[57].

Finally, and most significantly to pave the way to the analysis that follows, Canguilhem helps identify the element of vital and productive life as an impetus, a conatus that expresses each being's striving for existence and the capacity to impose and affirms its own norms. I argue that this definition captures the specificity of each being that escapes normalisation and qualification, and whose basis is identified with the expression of a natural, material order of life beyond the discursive operation of power. In order to expand on this element and further analyse how it can be productively expanded to challenge the problem of qualification – and exclusion – of types of life set out at the beginning of the enquiry, I thus turn to the naturalism of Spinoza in contemporary readings. The naturalist philosophy inspired by Spinoza and especially the link established between the affective status of existence and the production of ideas that can have an effect on the surrounding environment through ethics help me expand what I argued in regard to Foucault and to the ways of escaping the normalisation operated by power.

[57] Along with Povinelli (2016), another piece that offer a compelling analysis of Canguilhem and the function of his thought for past and contemporary politico-philosophical studies of life is Greco (2005). Greco compares Canguilhem's thought to the function that is today fulfilled by complexity studies. In an analogous way, she sees them working as a new normative compass that inspires different disposition to knowledge and analysis, one not aimed at the grasping of certainties in a teleological assumption but that rather is aware of the impossibility of reaching such certainty. A more thorough discussion of this analogy and line of enquiry is beyond the scope of this research. However, this suggestion certainly provides an interesting focus that might deserve further research and expansion. Finally, another interesting contribution to clarify the role of Canguilhem in the philosophy of science is Wolfe (2007).

Conclusion

The chapter offered an alternative reading of the definition and kind of life that is implied by Foucault's analysis and his moving beyond the problem of the qualification of life operated by biopolitics. Against the conclusions reached by both the debates of biopolitics and vitalism explored in Part I, the current chapter has tried to build an alternative attempt by returning to the theory of Michel Foucault. It demonstrated that, in fact, in his ground-breaking analysis of biopolitics, the author already shows the presence of a vital component in the idea of life implied by biopolitics. After exploring the introduction of Foucault's system and theorisation of biopolitics, envisioned in the shift from the juridical dimension of sovereign power to that of capillary mechanisms of social control by the norm, the analysis focused on his concept of resistance as a way to carve out a space for subjective freedom. For the author, this resistance of life is already co-present and is part of the mechanisms through which life that is made object of control and domination responds to power logics.

To the ideas of a resistance of life and freedom, which is significantly found primarily at the level of the corporeal or the bodily experience, I associated the idea of a vital understanding of life, in fact something that escapes the logics of appropriation and knowledge by power. This has been captured particularly by an analysis of the concept of the *dispositif*, as a way to explain the structure of relations in which both elements, life subjected to power and life reacting and actively responding to it, are formed, interact and become manifest in their mutual dependency. In order to reach the conclusion about a vital component of life and the role that the latter plays in explaining and justifying the working of mechanism of biopolitics, moreover, I also referred to the theory of Canguilhem, who plays a key role in inspiring the developments of Foucault's theory. The main contribution drawn from Canguilhem is to take vitalism not as an essentialising and foundational perspective, but primarily as a regulative principle. The very idea that a certain dimension of life always escapes the possibility for power to gain knowledge-control over it can lead to attempts to escape power dynamics and practice resistance. In this regard, it can be noted that Foucault understands critique of power dynamics through resistance not as a direct opposition to forms of domination, but rather as an attempt of the self "not to be

governed quite so much". I also attempted to formulate and frame this by borrowing the concept of "positive critique" used by Blencowe.

Once the co-presence of a productive understanding of life in the justification of power mechanisms have been established, then the following part of the chapter went on looking more closely to the way in which practices of resistance are realised and enacted. I have thus looked at the dimension of ethics that Foucault identifies with practices of freedom from power. An ethics understood as practices of "care for the self" has precisely the aim of attending to processes of subject formation in a way that is not simply passive or compliant to the aims of power, but rather productively interacts with it. If it is true that power mobilises states of being also in the affective dimension, then it is also possible for the subject to capitalise on these affective states and turn them into the source of action. This is the explanation that the function of Foucault's ethics captures.

Both the latter points are crucial for bridging the way to the following steps of the analysis and particularly to the engagement with the discussion of Spinozist theories. First, the idea of subjectivity in Foucault has been described with the idea of singularity, which captures the relational and situated character in which subjectivity emerges. Moreover, I also highlighted how the processes and norms that define the formation of subjectivity need to take place in an immanent plane, where logics of power are simultaneously the cause and the effect of processes of subject formation and nothing is external to these dynamics. The next step of the enquiry will build on these conclusions. It will show how Spinozist approaches help move from the individual dimension on which Foucault's analysis seems to be situated to the broader sphere of the context of relations in which the self is encumbered. In particular, the main difference and addition is that a similar ethical attitude built on the premises of a vitalist understanding of life will lead not only to a reaction to mechanisms of power or norms constituting one's surrounding environment, but also to the possibility of their modification. This will be explored through an analogy and expansion of the concept of *dispositif* here analysed to that of an ecosystem of ideas, where ideas are thought to have a material dimension. This will have implications also for the very understanding of the modes and possibility for critique (under assumptions of immanence), which I discuss more thoroughly in the next chapter.

Chapter 4
The Naturalist Norm of Life in the Spinozist Turn

Introduction

After providing a discussion of the idea of life in the two perspectives of biopolitics and vitalism, Chapter 3 explored Foucault's theory of biopolitics and resistance to introduce a different line of enquiry. I argued that Foucault's thought breaks with the qualification of life established by these perspectives; I suggested that the concept of *dispositif* accommodates the co-presence of a subjected idea of life and one that is seen as positive and productive. In this analysis, life can become the master and the agent of its own mode of being, even though still in response to the mechanisms established by power. Through the idea of critique, Foucault carves out the space for subjective freedom within the structures of biopolitical normalisation.

Chapter 4 moves on and expands the conceptualisation of the positive element found in the analysis of Foucault. It looks at the natural materialist thought of Spinoza elaborated and expanded upon by contemporary literature, as an approach that can help recognise the generative character of norms in immanence, by considering them not only in their discursive but especially in their material nature. It intimates that developments of Spinoza's materialist conception of thought, as found for instance in Deleuze's reading of the author or in more contemporary thinkers like Hasana Sharp, help conceive of forms of transformation of existent systems of relations among forms of living and being. I suggest an expansion of Foucault's concept of *dispositifs* (as the fundamental structures that articulate the possible field of experience and thus define the norm of possible modes of life) with a Spinozist ecology (or ecosystem) of thought developed by the authors just mentioned. In the latter, ideas hold a material force that is able to modify the surrounding system of relations, not by way of opposing it directly but rather by engaging in a process of transformation that can ultimately carve new spaces for subjective modes of expression and freedom. This is deemed to carry a transformative potential also on established normative systems that structure the sphere of life.

The chapter is structured as follows: I will first introduce the key aspects of Spinoza's materialist conception of ideas that have been emphasised particularly by

Deleuze, frame them in the broader outline of the author's metaphysics (as far as it is necessary to introduce the part of the author's thought that is relevant for the enquiry) and advance the suggestion that conceiving of dispositives as a materialist ecosystem of thought can help theorise how practices of resistance and critique become inscribed into an "ambient" understanding (Sharp, 2007) of norms and their functioniong - and eventually open up the possibility for their modification. Then, the analysis demonstrates how, in light of the previous assumptions, ethics comes to play a crucial role as a constant practice or mode of living able to modify existent norms and revitalise established ways of thinking. This ethics is grounded not on external systems of rules or attribution of value, but on the striving for existence that pertains to each mode of life in their singularity. I will use this term to qualify the type of relational ethics of life here suggested, which remains open and responsive to the contingency and specificity of modes of being. This can counter the qualifying and often exclusionary outcomes that the analysis of the approaches engaged in Part I brought to light. The chapter will conclude with a short analysis of an example to which the ethics of singularity here outlined can be applied: I select the case of refugees (with a short reference to some events in the latest 2015 European migration crisis), which links back to the reflections on the themes introduced in Chapter 1.

Immanent naturalism in the contemporary Spinozist Turn

It is often maintained that Spinoza provides a truly singular case in the landscape of modern philosophy. His embracing of immanence, combined with the idea of the identity of nature and God, have gained him a unique place intellectually and in the historical landscape of his time[58]. This has been recognised by the many authors who have built on Spinoza's thought more recently and who have brought Spinozism to a rediscovery in the last decades, so much so that it is possible to speak of a Spinozist turn in contemporary political theorising. As a matter of fact, contemporary literature has been variously appreciative of the significance of Spinoza's thought, whose legacy has been developed in many trajectories and with diverse aims. Toscano (2012), for instance, suggests that, thanks to his immanent

[58] For an accurate analysis of how Spinoza's work can be read in relation to his biographical experience and historical context see for instance Deleuze (1988b, 1992a); Hampshire (1956) or, more recently, Kisner and Youpa (2014).

approach, Spinoza's political and ethical projects are capable of putting profound philosophical questions as to how to address current historical circumstances, from the collective construction of a common political space to the sometimes catastrophic incursion of worldly events. Others, historically closer to Spinoza like Kant (in Boehm, 2011; Lord, 2010) and Marion (in Peden, 2014) invite to read Spinoza's thought more as disposition to philosophical thought in general, as a way of life. This is further reinforced by Gilles Deleuze, who highlights that "In Spinoza's thought, life is not an idea, a matter of theory. It is a way of being. It is only from this perspective that his geometrical method is fully comprehensible" (Deleuze, 1988b: 13). He goes on to say that demonstrations, which Spinoza's uses to organise his *Ethics*, can be creative and inventive, by starting from what is already given, which is, the configuration of ideas and experiences present to define a situation.

An account of all the strands that have generated from re-readings of Spinoza falls beyond the scope of this enquiry[59]. I will here focus especially on the mediation that some thinkers have offered of the author's thought and whose conclusions enable a dialogue with the steps accomplished at the previous stages of the research. In the range of the authors that can be gathered in the Spinozist turn in theory, I will focus primarily on the reading offered by Deleuze (1998b; 1992a), which is helpful to further expand on notions that he draws from Spinoza's metaphysical system (the notion of univocity stands out as one of the most meaningful contributions here for the scope of my analysis). Moreover, a very fruitful conversation with the arguments previously put forth by the thesis seems to be inspired by the work of Hasana Sharp, who, in the context of a feminist ethics, deploys the work of Spinoza to postulate a "renaturalisation" of politics (Sharp, 2007; 2011). In her work, it is particularly the notion of an "ecosystem of ideas" that helps expand the argument developed in regard to Foucault around the co-presence of a material and a discursive dimension of life. These are the trajectories that I will follow in the contemporary Spinozist turn in theory. Before exploring those ideas, it is necessary to provide a short outline of the key assumptions of Spinoza's naturalist system as read through the lenses of the literature here presented.

[59] The influence and re-readings of Spinoza have in fact been extensive and directed in different and multiple theoretical projects. A broad classification could distinguish across neo-Marxian perspectives (Althusser, 2006; Macherey, 1992, 1998; Balibar, 1998; Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2005; Negri, 1991, 2013); feminist approaches (Braidotti, 1994, 2006, 2013; Grosz, 1994, 2011) but also towards environmental and ecological thinking (Bennett, 2004, 2010; Sharp, 2007, 2011). All of them borrow from the fundamental assumptions of Spinoza's metaphysics and its ensuing ethico-political implications to address emerging questions in all these different fields of enquiry.

As outlined effectively by Hasana Sharp, in Spinoza, reality is conceived in a monistic sense, where everything is understood as part of an indefinitely complex, unbounded totality called Nature, substance or God, "which contains all that there is and all that could ever be" (Sharp, 2011: 68). Spinoza's ontology is thus presented as a unitary way of thinking, where everything needs to be understood as happening in the same (and the only existing) plane of immanence. The idea of a plane, which has been particularly popularised by Deleuze (1998b), suggests precisely a dimension that absorbs everything within itself, without leaving anything external to it. This coincides with the infinite and indefinite substance of nature. Nature, or Substance, then, is itself expressed in infinitely many attributes, or "ways of being", of which two are available to human understanding: thought and extension. Attributes are understood as discrete forces of existing and acting (Spinoza, 1985). In fact, Spinoza defines an attribute as "what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence" (Spinoza, 1985: 25). Each attribute, or way of being, is then itself differentiated into infinitely many modes. Modes must be conceived as endowed of a certain physical intensity (be their modes of thought, in the form of ideas, or of extension, as bodies). The notion of a physical intensity associated with each mode indicates that each of them corresponds to a certain specific degree of power, with which they are able to influence (or that is itself influenced by) other modes, ideas or bodies. Significantly, this specific degree of power that determines relative intensities is different from one to another of these modes. The latter passage helps introduce a fundamental notion in the naturalist system just outlined: that of singularity. In fact, this idea already appeared in the previous chapter in regard to the reading to the subjectivity found in Foucault's *oeuvre*. In the reading of Spinozist authors, each mode needs to be conceived as a singularity that, while being defined by the same substance as all others, also remains unique in its own existence and in the kind of relationships that it can establish with other modes, depending on its own unique power.

It is also important to notice that, whereas bodies and ideas remain distinct, since they usher from different attributes, thought and matter, yet, they share the same ontological status, since they both derive from the same substance of nature. In other words, there is no relation of hierarchy or transcendence among the attributes and modes that express being, since they all are expression of the same substance operating at the immanent dimension. This common ontological status can be best captured by Deleuze's idea of univocity (Deleuze, 1988b). All modes exist and find expression

only in immanence. As I suggested in regard to Foucault, "immanence" means that both the cause and the effect (of a phenomenon, a status or an entity itself) always remain within god or nature[60]. The idea of univocity that Deleuze provides, therefore, establishes a difference between substance and the essence of attributes, since the two have nothing in common and yet maintain an equal ontological status. Thus, defining them as univocal helps conceive of them as situated within the same sphere of being (in immanence), without establishing any form of hierarchy or transcendent principle. The concept of univocity helps formulate and capture the concept of difference without yet assuming a different degree of value among beings.

Within the complex system of a naturalist-material ontology, the specific understanding of thought (captured by Spinoza's theory of the mind) and the consequent role assigned to passions and to the affective dimension of experience are particularly important for the development of the following steps of the argument. I concentrate on these aspects in order to highlight how such a reading has implications for the possibilities of thought, existence and action - thus connecting to the thesis aim of explaining the productive character of life in its interaction with norms, and particularly the ones established by biopolitical regimes.

The naturalist idea of thought and passions

In the critical presentation of Spinoza's thought, in particular in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1992a), Deleuze outlines Spinoza's theory of the mind as standing in opposition to perspectives on the same issue dominating modern philosophy, in particular the idea of Cartesian dualism of mind and extension (Descartes et al., 1968; Deleuze, 1992a: 155-168). In Deleuze's reading, Spinoza rejects the thesis that there are different compartments of substance and reads thought and extension as two attributes of the unique substance of nature-god. Such a conception has implications for the ensuing theory of the mind and modes of experience. It implies redefining the relationship existing between thought and affects, which can no longer be seen as independent from one another (and with a subordination of the latter to the former) but are put on an equivalent ground. As

[60] This is reflected also in the very conception of nature. Nature can take the form of either a *natura naturata*, which captures the multiplicity of modes deriving from the infinite mind of god, and a *natura naturans*, which is instead the primordial cause of the expression of nature (Spinoza, 1985, also in Sharp, 2011). It must also be noticed that "nature" for Spinoza does not correspond to anything like a natural "environment", but it is rather synonym of everything that exists, which Spinoza dissolves in the notion of the one substance (including the modes of extension and thought, the mental and the physical) which are kept separate, but, fundamentally, also united in his system.

mentioned, both attributes are constituted by infinite modes. This means that also individual human minds are nothing but modes of the unique substance of nature and its infinite power of thought (Deleuze, 1992a: 155-168). The ideas present in individual minds correspond to states in the body, which pertains to the same substance. This is known as Spinoza's theory of parallelism (Deleuze, 1992a: 99-112). Parallelism indicates that neither the mind nor the body have primacy over the other. Rather, parallelism between mind and body implies a form of simultaneity: an action of the mind is necessarily an action in the body and vice versa, a passion in the body is also a passion in the mind (Spinoza, 1985; Hampshire, 1956): neither state plays a causal role on the other nor has any causal priority.

Such conception is important for my argument in two directions. First, the emergence and modification of states of the mind happen in dependence of states of the body; thus, they influence the formation of ideas and ways of thinking. Therefore, the disposition to certain modes of being and behaving depends on monitoring and navigating affections and intensities in the body. Such relationship between the mind and the body does not imply that the mind is subordinated to passions, but rather that, given their fundamental union, the mind needs to be sensitive to the influence of bodily affects in order to achieve its realisation. The reconsideration of the role of the body and what "it can do" is a central theme in the contemporary Spinozist turn and, among the many, both Deleuze (1992a: 217-234) and Sharp (2011) insist on it in order to highlight the overcoming of strong dualist positions that have informed philosophical approaches since modernity. In the monistic system they engage, the connection between thought and affects constitutes the essence of a way of being and existing, which is thus entirely ethical. In relation to this, bodies are conceived as modes: they are never subjects or substances but are determined primarily by the capacity of affecting and being affected (through the medium of relations). Bodies are therefore defined primarily in terms of capacities. This can be traced back to what mentioned in the previous chapter with regard to Foucault. There, too, the mechanisms of power in biopolitics appeared as directed towards the intensities, capacities and vitality of the body and the corporeal dimension, which act never as the mere ground of power dynamics, but also as capable of a subjective response. Significantly for my argument, affective ways of being generate also new ideas and new ways of thinking, by inducing an effect in the mind.

Secondly, the idea of the unitary substance comprising of extension and thought also implies that neither the mind nor the body can ever be conceived as isolated entities, but are always already in relation to an environment of other ideas or bodies, by which they are necessarily influenced. An awareness of this influence and interconnection is thus crucial for defining modes of being. Only when realising a unity with nature, that is, being part of an entanglement of different modes, each characterised by their own singularity of power, an alternative and complete fulfilment of reason is possible. Reason is not considered as a pure cognitive or intellectual function fundamentally distinct from the body. Again in Deleuze's readings, it rather points to a form of *living thought* (Deleuze, 1988b: 17). The latter puts therefore a question on ethics, which amounts to the disposition to cultivate and enhance life intensity by responding to - and eventually modify – the articulation of being within its milieu of existence. This will be further unpacked in the next section.

The idea of a broader, living thought is supported by Deleuze also in his *Spinoza. Practical Philosophy* (1988b) and can be given more attention. Deleuze points out that, in Spinoza, there is an apparent devaluation of the role and faculty of consciousness in favour of a more comprehensive idea of "thought". Consciousness is downplayed by the broader attention to the series of modes, intensities, movements and forces that define being, and of which there is no subjective or rational understanding or awareness (also in Williams, 2010). There is no complete awareness of the phenomena and actions occurring through the body by the conscious part of it. Simultaneously, the power of the mind, influenced by the spontaneous affections of the body, exceeds consciousness and rationality[61]. In this analysis, consciousness can thus be better understood as the awareness across stages of greater or lesser intensity of passions and forces, which produce a transformation in the parallel attribute. Depending on the more positive or negative sign of such intensities and forces (defined by either a process of augmentation or diminishing of thought's capacities and intensities respectively), passions can be defined as either sad or joyful. Joyful passions are those that affirm life and are responsible for one's navigating a system of relations in a way that enhances its intensities and survival.

[61] This idea marks a sharp difference from the way in which the body had been conceived in other philosophical perspectives. Especially, Spinoza's thought stands in contrast with either spiritualist or machinic theories of the body, which would become dominant in the 18th century (Macherey, 1992). A reference to passions in authors contemporary to Spinoza is instead rather rare, with few exceptions (see Hobbes, 1999, 2016; also in Frost, 2010).

The affects that orient one's living are linked to another central element in Spinozist thought, which has already been introduced via Canguilhem: the idea of the *conatus*, understood as the natural tendency of all bodies and ideas to strive for their maintenance and survival, and to persevere in their state of being as long as it does not run into negative encounters which diminish their vitality and energy (Spinoza, 1985). *Conatus*, again, can be read as a fundamental force, and pertains both to objects (animate or inanimate) and, crucially, ideas. The idea of *conatus,* here inscribed in a fully naturalist system, expands and further clarifies the "creative striving" seen in Canguilhem, as a urge of being to affirm itself and, in my reading, identified with the vital forces that in Foucault generated forms of positive critique and action against the existent configurations of (power) relations.

Deleuze further points out that a second implication of the analysis just addressed concerns the use and understanding of values. Values are commonly conceived as defining the attribution of judgments of good and evil. However, in the relational and affective approach of Spinoza's ontology, the ethical values of good and evil need to be reformulated and replaced with the notions of "good" and "bad", that is, of judgments that pertain to the kind of experience and the power of action deriving from it. Specifically, the judgment of "good" would be given to those relations that increase one body's powers (Deleuze, 1988b).

Existence and experience themselves could thus be understood as a practice of encounters, by which an entity can ultimately modify its way of being and strive for the best that pertains to its nature (Toscano, 2012). Ultimately, in the Spinozist theory of affects and naturalist thought, values (in the assessment of good and bad) have a relative sign: they depend on how something relates and expresses one's nature (or, contrarily, fails to fulfil it) through various encounters. I suggest that the latter point can be put in relation to what highlighted in the previous chapter on Foucault via Canguilhem: there are no fixed systems of principles that define what "the good life" is. Rather, this depends on the singular experience and positioning of a being and its capacity to maximise its forces.

Crucially, though, this experience is also closely intertwined with and dependent on the relations in the surrounding environment, in which beings can thrive, but that, also, they continuously contribute to modifying. To put it in Foucault's statement seen at the start of the enquiry, this applies to all "billions of living beings that inform their environment and inform themselves on the basis of it" (Foucault,

2003: 14-15). In Foucault, this experience and the consequent action generated from it took place at the level of bodily experiences and affects effected by power relations. Resistance corresponded to the force towards a subjective experience that strives to maximise its intensity and power, in response to the attempts of power to hinder it. The theory of parallelism and naturalism just outlined formulated particularly by Deleuze helps enlarge the production of intensities and forces to the domain of ideas: the goodness of the affects is translated into ideas that will have more force and power, even to shape and interact with established or fixed ideas of the "norm" and the "good". The latter point thus leads to a discussion of ethics.

The implications for a theory of ethics

The devaluation of consciousness and values just seen in the section above and pointed out by Deleuze as defining elements of Spinoza's system leads to the discussion of the role of ethics. Ethics can be here described as a catalogue or typology of immanent modes of existence (Spinoza, 1985) or, as Deleuze puts it, a vision of the world (Deleuze 1992a: 255) in which one necessarily participates. In this, ethics replaces morality, conceived as an absolute system of judgments, with a disposition and practice to receive affections coming from both body and thought, and to shape one's way of being and acting in response to the variation of such intensities. This understanding should by no means be reduced to a lower attitude of mere bodily and instinctive responses to the impulses received by the surrounding environment (in some form of mechanicism). Rather, ethics should be regarded as ushering precisely from a more comprehensive idea of rational life, which does not dominate passions from the outside (in the guise of an external agent having control over them) but by acknowledging passions and their effects as part and parcel of one's constitution and experience.

More specifically, as mentioned in the previous section, ethics can no longer be seen as the question of assigning essential values to modes of being (that is, the qualifications of good and evil; Deleuze, 1988b: 22). A fixed system of morality is replaced by the qualitative assessment of different modes of existence according to notions of good or bad. The attribution of value and direction of life are not imposed by any external force, but are generated within modes of life in their striving for affirmation and survival. "Ethical" (that is, acting towards the good) pertains to any

actions or ideas that increase the power of an entity, made up of both body and thought. This, however, should not be regarded as a purely self-centred process, since the realisation of joy and fulfilment is a fundamentally relational process, which depends on the encounters, movements and experiences that provide the context or, in better words, the *milieu*, to one's existence (Sharp, 2011). The development of thought itself therefore can never ignore the surrounding environment in which thought is contingently located. Thought, as seen from Deleuze's reading, in its connection to dispositions and, eventually, action, is situated in a structure of relations, entailing states of mind, affective intensities and physical conditions.

If relations determine the experience of intensities in terms of good or bad, then, existence is *already* ethical: ethics is here the selection and ability to navigate one's experiences in order to maximise capacities and power of action, or reject the kinds of relationships that instead hinder such power. This can thus be compared to the "networks" of relations effected by dispositives in Foucault's thought. From the point of view of responding and acting of the subject, practices of resistance as ethics can here be read as an expression of the force to maximise one's power of action and avoid those relationships that deny it.

The comparison with Foucault helps advance another point. From the analysis of a Spinozist system of relations, it is possible to derive an ethics that is entirely grounded on assumptions of immanence. As for the mechanisms of power in Foucault and the idea of *disposifs*, both systems share the assumption of an immanent causality, whereby the capacities of life are not pre-established as a set of abstract and fixed properties nor cannot be attributed as effect of forces extrinsic to life. Rather, they are generated in relation to the power dynamics in which they are embedded. Simultaneously, however, they contribute to forge and shape these very dynamics, in a continuous process whereby both elements work simultaneously as cause and effects of one another (Juniper and Jones, 2008).

It could be argued that the naturalist system just outlined lacks an idea of power comparable to that of Foucault. This, however, does not invalidate the reading I suggest. The theory of relationality absorbs all forms of relations, regardless of their character or sign. Relations of power are *part of* the same structure of relations of ideas and material structuring of the field of experience (as seen from the theory of parallelism) that already impact on the singular body. The apparent lack of an open engagement with power thus ensues from the broader scope of the naturalist system

just outlined (Sharp, 2011): I suggest that this system enlarges what has been established in Foucault, by tracing the connection between the subjective experience of the self in regard to its relations (like those with power) to the broader environment in which experience takes place and constituted by both bodies and ideas.

The latter claim, then, helps suggest a further reflection that completes the passage from Foucault to the theory of ethics drawn from contemporary readings of Spinoza and the implications they open. As mentioned in the previous chapter, ethics for Foucault was exercised as a form of "positive critique" that capitalises on the vital element of life in order to shape responses to the mechanisms of domination of power. In the further step introduced by analysing the contemporary Spinozist turn, the kind of experience within the system of one's relations cannot be determined in advance. Ethics consists in remaining attuned to the intensities that derive from a specific configuration of relations. This specificity can be captured again by the idea of a *singular* configuration. I suggest that the idea of and ethics of vital critique in Foucault finds its correspondent in what can be termed as an "ethics of singularity" in regard to the naturalism of Spinozist thought. This derives from the fact that ethics captures the openness to encounters with modes (bodies and ideas) regardless of the sign that they acquire. An ethics of singularity supports a disposition of remaining open to the encounters that maximise one's powers of acting, in response to the concentration and augmentation - or diminishing - of intensities.

Ultimately, accomplishing higher degrees of power and self-realisation implies building on one's agreement with nature, but simultaneously also modifying the surrounding environment (of ideas and thus of bodies) so as to express such a nature[62]. In the reading here, thus, ethics is therefore a correlate to Spinozist naturalistic (or "milieu") idea of thought: thought is part of nature (Deleuze, 1988b). Maximising the power of thought means also modifying the surrounding environment in order to accomplish one's self-realisation and striving of one's life by modifying the relations in which one is embedded. The effects and actions on the environment can therefore

[62] It is important to remember the specific meaning of "nature" in Spinoza (as *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* at the same time) to clarify the meaning of Spinozist naturalism. The latter position cannot be identified or equated to an abstract and universal law of nature considered in general and detached from its historical contingency: nature develops in connection to its surrounding, and not as an abstract and fixed principle or entity. Quoting Macherey, "it manifests itself nowhere else than in the totality of its modal relations, in which it is absolutely immanent, it is a nature that is itself produced in a history, and under the conditions that the latter necessarily attaches to it" (Macherey, 1992: 143). The historical perspective is also what distinguishes the accounts analysed at this stage of the enquiry from the approaches discussed in Chapter 2, where nature appeared to be treated as an absolute, ahistorical principle.

modify existent ideas and, even more crucially for the thesis, also existent norms that hinder one's power and nature.

In this regard, then, the ethics just outlined expands the dynamics analysed in Foucault, when it comes to respond and interact with the existent system of relations in which one is situated. It demonstrates how ethics captures the power of interacting productively with systems of relations that define one's being and subjectivity. Simultaneously, however, the development observed here seems also to move beyond Foucault, who ultimately stopped at the level of resistance to power, and explains interactions within the broader milieu, or, to use an expression deployed by Sharp (2007, 2011), "ecosystem" of relations, of which power is part.

This reading also demonstrates how the response to structures of relations cannot be isolated from the dimension of the body or affective experience only, since the corporeal dimension already produces a modification of thought. Ethics becomes the domain for generating and producing new ideas. As mentioned also in regard to Foucault, this justifies how thinking, concepts and ideas do not function as a hinder to life (something that the "vitalist turn" examined in Chapter 2 would seem to maintain), but *enable* new forms of existence by acting in continuity to the affective dimension. Ultimately, the system drawn from Spinoza and further elaborated by contemporary authors, and particularly Deleuze's reading, extends and expands on the vitalist element recognised in Foucault and inscribes it in a theory that accounts for the modification of one's surrounding, in terms of both ideas and states of beings. The next section further clarifies the latter point.

The materiality of ideas: towards an ecological thought

The section above has just focused on the particular reformulation that a living or naturalist thought undergoes in Spinoza's metaphysical system as reread especially through the mediation and interpretation of Deleuze. It is now possible to move a step further, by engaging with ideas that have been put forth by another author in the contemporary Spinozist turn: Hasana Sharp and her attempt to pave the way to a politics of renaturalisation shaped after Spinoza's legacy (Sharp, 2011). An implication of the system outlined is that ethics becomes the dimension where possibilities and modes of existence can be transformed and modified. In this light, another possible way to define Spinoza's idea of thought could be that of an

"ecological thought" or an "ecology" of ideas (Bryant, 2012, also an "ecosystem of ideas" by Sharp, 2007, 2011)[63]. The latter definitions imply that ideas (and any sorts of texts or signifiers in general) are not mere vehicles of meaning or content but are also endowed of a material reality in their own right. That means, as seen, they possess a material power of affecting and modifying compositions of forces, that impacts on the articulation of reality (especially in response to existent structures and modes of being).

Moreover, such materiality cannot exist abstractly or separately from the concrete context in which ideas are formed and operate. Their inherent power could be described as a spatio-temporal materiality that has impact on the specific location and environment in which it is situated. Bryant (2012), who also significantly draws from Deleuze's take on Spinoza, suggests that ideas possess their own "geography", meaning that some ideas are more common in some places of the world than others. This indicates that some ideas are endowed of a degree of intensity and power that change in accord to the environment in which they exist and act. Most crucially, there can be places or contexts in which established sets of ideas (of either positive or negative sign) can be stronger or more dominant, and thus play a more preeminent role in defining modes of being.

Merging the latter consideration to what was argued in the previous section about ethics and the nature and power of thought, thought can interact with its surrounding, affecting and modifying the environment or "milieu" of dominant ideas, so as to fulfil its own realisation. This implies that ethics can amount to a practice of developing strategies to select among the intensities of specific encounters, by weakening certain ideas that are deemed detrimental to or hindering one's nature and, simultaneously, promoting and enabling the existence of those ideas and forces that enable and favour one's being. Ethics becomes therefore a practice that makes one able to act on, change or modify existent relations among ideas or bodies. Crucially

[63] Deleuze specifically names it as an "ethology" (Deleuze, 1988b): it concerns the capacity (of humans and animals) to be affected and thus captures the changes in their powers. This is thus related to the broader theory of affects introduced above: joyful and sad passions are described as effects of those encounters that either lower (sad) or increase (joy) modal degrees of power, those moments when entities are most separated from or united to their power of acting. Consequently, ethics is oriented towards a theory of joy that maximises action (as expression of the fundamental *conatus* that drives entities towards perseverance). Quoting from Deleuze, "The entire *Ethics* is a voyage of immanence. But immanence is to unconscious itself, and the conquest of the unconscious. Ethical joy is the correlate of speculative affirmation" (Deleuze, 1988b: 29). The suggestion of reading Spinoza's thought as an ethology has also prompted some authors to formulate a different theory of rights generated by it. This is a theory rethought at the level of the bodies themselves. I will not expand this further development here, although this possible line of enquiry will be kept in mind for further research. For a rethinking of a theory of rights from a vitalist/Spinozian perspective, see for instance Hanafin (2014, 2017).

for my analysis and for the following argument around the implications of the thesis for politics, it can even enable and enact strategies for cultivating, replicating, and defending new ideas that replace or challenge existent ones - especially when seen as unproductive and detrimental - in order to generate a new order or ways of thinking. Bryant again (2012) describes a similar conception of thought as an ecologist or an epidemiologist (more than an interpretive) work on ideas. The latter enhances the question of "how to restructure that material system of ideas, that ecology, allowing other ideas to show through and become potent. Critique is not enough. There also has to be the public work of diminishing ideas, speaking to populations, and enhancing the power of other ideas." (Bryant, 2012)[64].

Such description captures the fact that ideas are part and operate into a certain "milieu" with other ideas. This means that the character that they assume (or their relative sign and value) are always dependent on their interactions with the broader system of ideas or context in which they are located. It presupposes that ideas and, for the sake of the research, any discursive formation generating mechanisms of norms and normalisation, have a material import and are endowed of a spatio-temporal power that can enact and contribute to inform a certain reality (as opposed to a sole role as mediators). This implies that the challenge, or enterprise, to change established sets of ideas or norms need to pass through a deep and systemic transformation of ways of thinking that interact with, are expressed and simultaneously formed and renewed by the very practices that they generate.

The argument put forth at this stage of the thesis suggests that the work of resistance to and transformation of the discursive shaping of the subject in biopolitics already started by Foucault can be continued and fulfilled when taking into account not only a semantic/discursive but also the material nature through which ideas (also in the form of norms) become realised and enforced. An understanding of the materiality of ideas derived from the current Spinozist turn helps complete this move

[64] A crucial aspect to discuss at this point would be the problem of the "character" or the "sign" of the ideas that are fostered in a certain context. The idea of "speaking to population" in particular seems very ambivalent as to the kind of ideas that can be spread, since this could also end up opening the possibility of conditioning or manipulating ideas present in the social field. In fact, this risk is possibly less present in Spinoza himself, since in many points of his work (2004) he seems to refer to processes of public deliberation as a way of enhancing the formation and expression of new ideas. These cannot thus be seen as product of a manipulation or imposition, since emerging ideas are more the expression of a people's way of thinking (understood as a collective thought). This could be an interesting and further line to develop regarding the possibilities opened by Spinoza's thought and critique. The scope of the present project does not allow to develop this trajectory of research in its full; however, I do indicate it as a possible additional development of a complementary line of enquiry that could be brought ahead in a further project.

and expands my analysis of Foucault. It capitalises on the power of life that, in Foucault, I have identified with practices of resistance and cultivation of the self to demonstrate how this can be expanded to produce a transformation in the surrounding milieu of relations. This is made possible by a conjunction of affective states of the body (the level at which resistance is practiced) with the production of ideas able to interact with the existent structures of relations of ideas and norms. In a perspective derived from Spinozist thought, possibilities of resistance and critique become exercised at the level of changing and acting upon the "ambient", that is, the environment sets of norms (Sharp, 2007) that characterise one's context and that are transformed by the material force of the new ideas inserted in it. This is put as the starting condition for opening up possibilities for changing existent normalising structures.

Before moving on, an additional observation can be added to further corroborate the argument just advanced and develop a parallel observation about critique advanced also in regard to Foucault. Hasana Sharp (2007, 2011) further points out the idea of paying more attention to the force of ideas and their capacity to impact on the surrounding environment (in her argument, in order to accomplish a "renaturalisation" of politics), through the theory of an "ecosystem of ideas" just outlined. She argues that this form of challenge to existent power and social relations should supplement traditional forms of (ideology) critique (Sharp, 2011: 55-84). It represents an attempt to "re-naturalise" ideas from their relegation to their solely discursive dimension, which was dominant in the developments of philosophy and theory in the 20th century (see also Coole and Frost, 2010; Van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2012).

What is striking, however, is that this move by Sharp seems to recall the analysis previously conducted around Blencowe's notion of "positive critique" (2012) and touched on in Chapter 3. Blencowe had also highlighted that forms of resistance and critique need to find different and novel modes of articulation in the context of biopolitical mechanisms. In her words, traditional and Marxian critiques appear not or no longer sufficient to strive for resistance and change in the relational and immanent context of the discourses highlighted here. They need to be reconsidered and supplemented by other actions and practices able to enhance transformative action. This also justifies why, as seen above, Bryant states that "critique is not enough".

Vis-à-vis the conclusions reached, in fact, the question as to whether it is still possible to speak about critique could be asked (Andrejevic, 2014; Noys, 2012). I will fully develop and address this point in Chapter 5 when connecting the observations just performed to an approach of "dispositional ethics" (Beausoleil, 2017). The analysis there will more directly address the problem of the meaning of politics implied by the argument, and the interaction with forms of critique. For the time being, it can be noticed that the practice of fostering ideas and acting at the level of the modification of relations seems to problematise other forms of critique, without yet excluding them. The system of ideas and affect outlined in Chapter 4 seems to challenge forms of direct and confrontational critique, in order to move towards an idea of action and conduct where transforming and questioning norms happens by remaining attuned and responding to one's systems of relations. If it is possible to expand Foucault's idea of challenging norms and impositions of ways of living by power, this comes "at the cost" of supplementing critique with a work of enhancing new modes of being and thinking in a purely immanent and relational dimension. In Chapter 5, I will demonstrate how this attempt to develop actions and behaviours able to modify the surrounding environment can enter and have an effect on the domain of politics.

Applying an ethics of singularity: the case of refugees

Before moving on to the concluding step of the enquiry, this section tries to exemplify the approach of an ethics of singularity here formulated by looking at a context where the idea can be applied. The analysis of the case here by no means claims to be exhaustive, and a complete study would possibly require a full independent investigation. Nevertheless, it appears useful to show how the idea of the ethics of singularity here formulated can be put into practice and indicate a possible trajectory of research, before moving on and further elaborating on its political implications. To this aim, I would like to return to the debate initiated with the analysis of Arendt in Chapter 1 and taken on by Agamben around the figure of refugees. I will take this case as an example where a politics of life that deploys the idea of qualification and engagement with life as singularity seems to provide a more relevant and adequate response in accounting for modes of engagement with forms of life beyond qualifications and normalising categories than the approaches offered by either the frameworks of biopolitics or of vitalism. While going back to the theoretical

discussion as treated in Arendt, I will also shortly make reference to the contemporary 2015 European migration crises and some of the responses and framing of the issue witnessed in that circumstance.

As shown in Chapter 1, the figure of the refugee has been commonly discussed from a biopolitical perspective of analysis. As Agamben notices (2000: 92-93), in fact, the very condition of refugees poses the question of the regulation and inscription of life in the juridical and biopolitical order of the nation-state. There, I demonstrated how Arendt highlighted this problem (1943) by looking at the categories of citizen/non-citizen: from a biopolitical perspective, the figure of the refugee remains excluded from the normal political order centred on the nation-state as its primary organising unit[65]. In the short essay "We Refugees", Arendt (1943) advocates a radical refashioning of the idea of refugees as symbol of a new historical consciousness, defining refugees as the "vanguard" of their peoples (Arendt, 1943: 77), that is, those who already point to a different mode of existence, which cannot be grasped by present categories[66]. Agamben, too (2000: 15-28) endorses this call and advocates the overcoming of the political categories available in the present.

As mentioned, the issues regarding the (dis)qualification of the form of life of refugees is emblematically reflected in the historical experience following WWII, which brought to manifestation the contradictions inherent to the treatment of the case of refugees and the tensions existent between notions of citizen rights and the related idea of *human* rights. In fact, in this circumstance, "human rights" proved to be a very problematic and paradoxical notion. At the time, the LNHCR was created as a "neutral broker" (Orchard, 2014: 109) in order to protect those who could not be recognised as entitled to any state-based protection[67]. However, it is precisely in the enactment and

[65] In Arendt's analysis, the "nation-state" itself suggests that the modern order organised around it is grounded on a unit that equates nation, sovereignty and territoriality as inseparable terms of its definition. In such rationale, it is particularly birth, or "nativity" (Arendt, 2013; Vatter, 2006) to be erected as criterion that defines identity and belonging and the ensuing attribution of protections in the form of rights. In the system of nation-states, therefore, the idea of rights is attributed to human beings insofar as they can enjoy the condition of citizenship. Conversely, the refugee actually embodies the figure that marks a break with the identification between human and citizen, since it already eludes the direct link between nativity and nationality.

[66] In this regard, Agamben also suggest that the refugee should in fact be considered as a limit-concept, which manifests the implosion of the notion of the nation-state as a juridico-political principle on which to ground the international order, and thus opens up the way to the formulation of utterly new conceptual political categories. In relation to the need of formulating new categories, Agamben also makes reference to the figure of "denizens". The latter term has been formulated by Thomas Hammar to identify the (new) condition of noncitizen-residents that, although having a nationality of origin, decide not to benefit from the entitlements that the latter offers, and accept to live in a different country in a *de facto* situation of statelessness (Hammar, 1990).

[67] A deeper analysis of the way in which the LNHCR came to existence, its historical function and experience and its modes of operation and actual effectiveness is not of specific concern for the analysis here. For a deeper discussion on this, including debates around the efficacy, problems and limitations inherent to the body and to its grounding assumptions, see Orchard, 2014 or Soguk, 1999 (in particular, Chapter 3, 101-142).

the outcomes reached by this organism that the contradictory ethics applied in the question of refugees started to appear clear: the juridical measures showed how it was impossible for people to enjoy the condition of complete freedom without being fully inscribed as members of a national society. Conversely, only the recognition of states' absolute authority of self-determination entitled them to the responsibility of people's protection (thus tracing a clear distinction between citizens or not citizens). In fact, it was imposed that all the people who had fled their homes should be repatriated to their homelands of birth or alternatively naturalised as citizens of another nation (Hayden, 2016)[68].

Moreover, there was another contradiction intrinsic to the way the refugee policy started to be implemented by the UN. It implied a clash, or at least a mutual dependency (and, thus, the ensuing risk of exclusion and reciprocal limitation) between the freedom of those who were admitted as refugees and the citizens of the states. The intake and freedom of refugees (that is, their being recognised as free individuals and thus being admitted in a civic community) came to depend on the freedom of citizens themselves to decide between those who were wanted and those who were not. The decision over the condition of refugees, thus, in practice, came to depend on a relationship with the citizens of a certain state. Refugees occupied therefore an ambiguous and rather peculiar position in this framework. They neither took part nor were involved in the decision that concerned their condition. In line with what has been emblematically expressed by Arendt, although being formally considered as entitled to the rights associated with personhood (only as receiver), refugees could not exercise the rights and capacities attributed to persons, like free will or autonomy of choice. This reveals the very contradiction present at the basis of the idea of human rights understood as a biopolitical device of inclusion/exclusion and attribution of value to types of life (Arendt, 1943) [69].

[68] The situation partly changed after WWII and with the creation of the UN, where the ethics and rationale of the refugee problem is shaped more in terms of the relationship among a *system* of sovereign states (going towards the making up of a global society) and were people conceived as free individuals under the protection of the (international) law. According to critics (Hayden, 2016), this marks the beginning of humanism in the logics of global statecraft and thus the advent of the language of human rights. In fact, the starting plan of intervention by the UN (originally deemed to last three years) failed, and the condition of refugees became a more widespread phenomenon requiring further change of the criteria and definition by the international jurisdiction. To put it simply, the creation of autonomous new states worldwide, and the solution of conflict within and among them, appeared as a cause for the further intensification and augmentation of the phenomenon of the refugees. Therefore, the latter became an almost common spread reality across Europe and beyond.

[69] It must be specified however that Arendt's criticism of human rights was particularly attached to the specific form in which the human rights discourse was utilised particularly to deal with the historical circumstances contemporary to the author. As other thinkers have suggested (Benhabib, 2013), Arendt's intervention in the debate

Significantly for my analysis, the conclusions just reached deploy all the categories (those of person, human and citizen) that have been highlighted and considered in Chapter 1 and that showed how, from the perspective of biopolitics, such qualifications worked as apparatuses of normalisation that classify the types of life that should enter into the political order and that define them as "proper", as opposed to improper forms of living. In the analysis above, the device of human rights, through a biopolitical lens, further demonstrates this process of qualification: even though defined as "human" and therefore attributed a universal validity, these rights cannot be equated or enforced in the same way as the rights of citizens. To quote Hayden: "The basic international law that pertains to refugees is meant to protect the rights of all humans, especially once they are displaced. However, once in the position of displacement, the refugee or refugee claimant have far less effective purchase on the rights than those remaining free citizens" (Hayden, 2016: 312). In other words, a system of nation-states implicitly forces us to confront the question of what rights count more, those of citizens or those derived from the freedoms of homeless refugees. Therefore, it implicitly establishes and already relies on a hierarchy of (human) beings that are not *de facto* considered (and treated) as equals vis-à-vis a super-state international law.

Even though the analysis so clearly highlighted by Arendt was specifically applied to the events of her time, the purchase that an approach of biopolitics have in debates around refugees and, more broadly, discourses of security in International Relations is still undeniable today, when addressing more contemporary cases in refugee studies. The concepts and vocabulary provided by the biopolitical literature on exceptionalism and on mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion operating at national and sub-national level are pre-eminent in providing the lenses for looking into these phenomena. Above all, it is possibly Agamben's idea around exceptional measures (1998, 2005) and "bare life" discussed in Chapter 1 that offers a most common angle of interpretation to engage with these debates. The image of the multiple camps that have been created along borders and shores proves Agamben's most compelling diagnosis that the pervasiveness of the camp has become the paradigm of the modern West (Agamben, 1998; Peters, 2017) and certainly it is most effective in capturing the

has also played a crucial role in fostering a rearticulation and revision of human rights approaches towards a more appreciative and sensitive account of the value of human plurality (also in the global community).

condition of the subjects involved in the wide variety of today's exceptional situations. In this regard, such readings still have an undeniable purchase in demonstrating how the biopolitical treatment of life produces a distinction between human and non-human, and potentially dehumanises certain forms of life (Aradau et al., 2011; Doty, 2011). This appears in line with the argument developed in Chapter 1.

As explored in Chapter 1, moreover, much of the criticism and arguments around the abandonment of existent political categories started by Arendt and Agamben is still centred around the critique of the function of the nation state and the role it plays in managing and orchestrating forms of exceptionalism. The idea of the state of exception is preeminent in exemplifying the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that characterise the qualification of life in biopolitical discourses (Humphreys, 2006; Maguire et al., 2014; Neal, 2006). In such understanding, states of exception serve to mark the boundaries of a series of constitutive exclusions by which the state (precisely by means of excluding certain categories and forms of life) legitimises its internal order and constitution. In this regard, refugees can be seen as subject to the logic of reproducing an "inclusive exclusion" which allows the state to establish the criteria of "normality" and "order" (Agamben, 2000, 2005), since they continue to be included in this discourse precisely by virtue of their exclusion from established identities and ordered spaces of the sovereign state and biopolitical apparatuses.

A similar account of such function of the state is the one on which Deleuze and Guattari have commented on. They define the sovereign relation as one that "only reigns over what is capable of internalising, of appropriating locally" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 360) and thus a relation which exercises an extractive power of appropriation, or, as they call it, an "apparatus of capture". Interpretations from a biopolitical perspective, endorsed by the current language of securitization (Aradau, 2011; Huysmans, 2000, 2006) remain bounded by the classification of forms of life provided above. While providing a most necessary and helpful critical insight, yet, they are hardly able to capture initiatives or instances that challenge the order enforced under biopolitical and exceptional apparatuses, which thus remain excluded from their account. Biopolitical approaches, thus, while offering a most timing diagnosis of some contemporary discussions around refugee studies, can only detect certain types of phenomena and examples to deal with this complex problematic.

I would like to go back to the schematic traced in Part I of the thesis and demonstrate that, in an analogous way, theories of vitalism seem equally unable to provide an account that challenges the assumption of biopolitics when applied to the case of refugees. In fact, vitalism has also attempted an engagement with this debate. In response to approaches of biopolitics, they try to rehabilitate an idea of freedom and value of life which is grounded on the ontological dimension of existence, as the domain where the freedom, liveliness and vitality of life can affirm itself beyond constraints. The starting point from a purely affirmative idea of life tends to be captured and celebrated in these domains by the attention for movement, of vitality and freedom (Franke, 2009, 2011; Neil, 2015; Nyers, 2013), that is inherent to any mode of existence prior to and independent from any juridical qualification or inscription in a political domain. Interpretations of the problem of refugees from a vitalist standpoint, or of forms of life that are diminished and annihilated within the (bio)political account, offer a solution that shifts power and agency to the side of those "diminished" lives excluded by the political order. Although very sympathetic to the intentions of these solutions and readings, I argue that also these perspectives seem to show the problem of simply reinstating the same qualification and categories of modes of life used in biopolitics, without fundamentally challenge the framing of the discourse. This is the argument that I have advanced in the theoretical analysis in Chapter 2 and that I now proceed to exemplify with the case here discussed.

I can provide some examples of vitalist interpretations to the problem of refugees in order to demonstrate my last point. Elizabeth Grosz (1994), for instance, who offers a version of a vitalist perspective, maintains that under the perspective of global migration, the figures of the refugees or migrants become regarded not as merely passive or neutral to the experiences of exceptionalisms and exclusions highlighted above. Rather, refugees themselves actively contribute to reconfigure, reinscribe and resist existent patterns and orders as they move across political spaces. This perspective thus emphasises the value of life that is found in a condition of movement, affirmation and freedom as an ontological condition (Grosz, 1994).

In a different piece (2010), however, Grosz makes another controversial point regarding the qualification of life and freedom attached to figures that are left at the margin or excluded from the political order. She acknowledges that the potentials for creation, expression and experimentation ascribed to life in vital terms do require a

certain level of material freedom from constraints and wellbeing in order to be able to produce different forms of life. Nevertheless, she also adds that

> even in the most extreme cases of slavery and in situations of political or natural catastrophe of the kinds globally experienced in recent years, there is always a small space for innovation and not simply reaction. What remains remarkable about genocidal struggles, the horrors of long term incarceration, concentration camps, prisoner of war camps, and the prospects of long-term social coexistence in situations of natural and social catastrophe is the inventiveness of the activities of the constrained […]. What is most striking about the extreme situations of constraint, those which require a 'freedom from' is that they do not eliminate a 'freedom to' but only complicate it (Grosz, 2010: 157).

I do appreciate the attempt of this reading to move beyond any reductionist or annihilating interpretation provided by biopolitics, and the broader aim to elaborate an idea of freedom unhinged from formal political recognitions and structures (that, along with the premises of vitalism, she rather envisions as belonging to the *ontological* dimension of being). However, I also maintain that such a claim seems to decrease or to downplay the urgency and gravity of the situations listed above, even ending up justifying them and reaffirming the status quo of the existent political reality that generates these circumstances of inequality, degraded treatment and annihilation of life in the first place. Most importantly, for the sake of my argument and question around the classification of life in the debates set out in the first part of the enquiry, this approach seems to maintain an equal classification and categorisation to the one offered by biopolitics, this time simply reversing the emphasis and the priority on the natural or excluded form of life.

Another example, moreover, can be drawn from the analysis conducted by Viriasova (2013). Although not explicitly endorsing the language of vitalism, many of her conclusions seem to resonate with the latter perspective introduced above. She develops a larger project to elaborate an idea of life that escapes any reference to political categories altogether, defined as "unpolitical"[70]. This aim sounds in line with the similar invitation expressed by Arendt and Agamben highlighted at the beginning of the section. She explores this possibility by elaborating a perspective based on an account of life as pure affectivity and acosmic becoming. The application of this theory to the study of refugees brings her to further radicalise the philosophy of movement

[70] Although, Viriasova is very careful to distinguish her use of this term from the similar one deployed by Cacciari (2009). Moreover, her analysis is a most interesting survey and investigation of current critical refugee studies, of which she offers an interesting a compelling catalogue (Viriasova, 2013: 239-257).

found in vitalist understandings and celebrate a pure phronomic idea of being and "displaced lives" (Viriasova, 2013: 257). This is translated into the absolute affirmation and celebration of the "bare life" that is found beyond any politics and of which the figure of the refugee should become the new emblem and "vanguard". She comes to the conclusion that

> The question of where to begin becomes very important once we consider the "practical" issues of living outside of the political system of states today. In the absence of a political community, it becomes of the utmost importance to assert that life is not a right, nor a quality that manifests itself in the world, but is an invisible experience of self-affection that is full of itself and rejoices in itself even in the most unhappy 'forms' of life. To do so means to redeem "bare life" in a positive, unpolitical way, that allows it to persist as such, without an immediate incitement to politicization, to salvation through politics (that produced its apparent misery in the first place). (Viriasova, 2013: 258).

Once again, although acknowledging the importance and broader scope of the philosophical enterprise that the author sets out, I maintain that similar conclusions remain deeply problematic when it comes to facing concrete problems and instances in today's political practice, since they risk to merely reinforce the many instances of exclusions and normalisation without the capacity to provide any response to the issue of refugee and movement at the ontic level. In this regard, Viriasova and similar approaches that start from the pure celebration of the affectivity or vitality of life also lose any purchase against the problems highlighted by biopolitical analysis that, yet, they try to counter.

Therefore, the debate seems to fall back into a binary that resonates with the ontopolitical matrix provided in the introduction. The theoretical and philosophical premises underpinning either the debates of biopolitics and of vitalism seem not to be able to provide a response to the question of looking for an alternative engagement with forms of life here investigated. It is here argued that, in fact, modes of engagement with life at the level of the contingent and situated everyday relations and practices are more plural and complex than the one portrayed by these approaches; however, these are instances that the perspectives analysed here are unable to grasp. More specifically, they remain framed into rigid and often binary categories in explaining how forms of life should and can be accounted for. Vis-à-vis this inability, one could thus be left asking: is it possible to conceive an alternative way to explain and justify the engagement with modes of life beyond the inability ascribed to these perspectives?

Can an ethics of singularity elaborated by the thesis help in this enterprise? I intimate that a positive answer to these questions is possible. An example in this direction can come from a short analysis of some instances related to the latest EU 2015 refugee and migration crisis, to which I briefly turn.

The case of the EU 2015 migration crisis

Since 2015, Europe has been invested by a large-scale migration emergency in consequence of the conflicts taking place primarily in Syria. The arrival of an unprecedent number of refugees on the European soil and the ensuing debates regarding refugee intake, policy responses at domestic and European level and the impact on the political life of single countries, has been object of both academic and media attention. Offering a thorough account of the phenomenon and of the still emerging literature produced around the subject falls beyond the scope of this project. Nevertheless, I would like to engage with it just as far as it appears useful to exemplify some arguments developed in the previous enquiry.

In the section above, I demonstrated how analyses from a biopolitical perspective continue to have an appeal and relevance for studies around issues of exceptionalism, refuge and migration. The treatment of the question of refugees also in the case of 2015 has not been excluded by this trend and studies on the subject have largely borrowed from the framework of biopolitics (Kmark, 2015; Vaughan-Williams, 2015; Whitham, 2017). Agamben's idea of the camp as a defining paradigm of the present and the disqualification of life in the form of bare life that comes with the establishment of modern forms of camps have a deep relevance in approaches to the subject. The language of exceptionalism itself declared in many circumstances has well captured trends and features that describe the situation (Kmar, 2015). In this regard, biopolitics offers a most compelling and valid analysis of the dehumanising face of the crisis and particularly of its subjects.

I argue that, following the steps of the enquiry here conducted, the purchase and relevance of an analysis from a biopolitical angle can be further expanded by deploying the concept of *dispositif* that I have introduced in Chapter 3 of the analysis, and that can be applied to the case here. Defined as the configuration of both practices and discourses that define the possibility of existence and experience in a certain context, the idea of the *dispositif* seems to well capture the dynamics that have enacted the language of securitisation and the often negative representation of the situation in

the case of the 2015 EU migration crisis. Policies discussing the problem in terms of open or closed borers, the rhetoric of political leaders around acceptance of refugees within national territories, the political propaganda (often from a far-right perspective) that has ignited the debate, and the representation and coverage by national media and press are all elements of the *dispositif* through which the situation of the "crisis" has been produced, portrayed, represented and handled. In agreement with the analysis of the term, the *dispositif* of power structures both the discursive representation and the experience of the crisis and organises the responses that can be developed from it (Bussolini, 2010).

Yet, to substantiate the argument I developed in Chapter 3, I claim that already in the biopolitical structuring of relations and experiences through the *dispositif*, it is possible to witness the carving of a space for resistance to the discursive normalisation operated by power in the representation of the crisis as well as in the engagement with the lives that are involved in the situation. I read episodes of resistance as the staging of modes of engagement with life different from the ones envisioned by power rationales. I argue that, in line with the analysis above, the mobilisation of the affective disposition in which subjects are produced and normalised within the discourse of biopolitics itself creates space for an action that counters normalising logics and that is played at the level of the ethical.

I would like to demonstrate this claim by bringing attention to a series of events and conducts witnessed in the context of the response to the refugee crisis. As an alternative response to the often restrictive policies (and equally negative narratives) surrounding and shaping the reception of the crisis, many individuals and families across Europe have given their own response by accepting to host refugees in their households. This phenomenon has had examples in many countries and has been supported by organisations operating internationally to promote the initiative. Among these, Refugee Welcome International (2015) has been active across 12 countries in and beyond Europe (from Japan to Canada, to Australia and several countries in Europe) to support cases where migrants and asylum seekers have been matched and then integrated with families volunteering to host them and supporting them during their process of integration in the community of arrival. The organisation has provided support in selecting and then helping with the integration of refugees in the families that volunteered to act as hosts.

The aims and goals of the organisation are collected in their founding chart and defined as follows[71]:

1. Increasing the awareness of the living conditions experienced by many categories of people (migrants, refugees, homeless people…) within the community;
2. Improving the living conditions of people experiencing struggle and making a positive contribution to their long-term wellbeing;
3. Bringing people together and enhancing initiatives of mutual help;
4. Contributing to social growth and to solidarity among people;
5. Encouraging communication and exchange among people with different cultural and social backgrounds;
6. Fighting any form of prejudice and promoting social inclusion of disadvantaged categories (Refugee Welcome Italia, 2016).

Although the number of cases that have been addressed with this initiative remains still incomparably narrow with regard of the numbers that the crisis required to handle, I argue that this initiative can represent an example of a case of engagement with life that can be captured by the idea of singularity as outlined in the analysis performed thus far. The decision of hosting a refugee demonstrates the relating to ways of being that moves beyond the discursive representation provided by power and the power structuring of relations through the *dispositif* of crisis management. Rather, the response is instead reimagined and reconfigured beyond any pre-given qualifications and categories and takes place in the situated, contingent and affective relational encounter with modes of living. This pertains to the practice of an ethics as the one outlined above, that looks at life not as a diminished and already qualified instance, nor one that simply affirms life as an *a priori*, which is seen as collapsing in the same inactivity and inability to result in concrete action. Rather, it capitalises on the response of people who reject and resist the dominant language and rhetoric with which the situation of the crisis has been portrayed by dominant discourses.

The framing of the analysis in terms of an ethics of singularity suggests a possible way out and a tentative explanation vis-a-vis the insufficiency of the frameworks provided by either biopolitics or vitalism. In fact, the perspective suggested here envisions an ethical approach that does not start from the attribution of

[71] The network is divided into 14 units corresponding to the different country members and each of them has developed their own founding documents and regulations to respond to the specific needs and situations characterising each country. The example provided above has been taken from the "Statuto" (2016) of the Italian unit of the network. Italy has been one of the countries that has witnessed the arrival of a large number of refugees and in which the initiative has had a strong response. Translation is my own.

given categories, but looks at the engagement with life in the moment of the very establishment of relationships. As a consequence, an ethics of singularity does not hinge on abstract principles but takes into account the situatedness of the relations, the context as well as the forms of being among which such relationships are established. This seems to evade the question of content and classification of modes of life and looks rather at the practical response and terms of betterment within which individuals establish such relationships. The treatment of the "other" of the refugee under the assumption of singularity therefore eludes the problem of passing through the need for categorisation altogether and takes relationality as its point of departure[72].

There are two further aspects that I would like to highlight in order to support the analysis and application of the case. First, crucially, the language with which this initiative has been framed has invited families to host a refugee as a "deep experience of exchange and sharing" that improves the lives of all those involved (Refugees Welcome, 2016). The invitation to participate in the initiative invokes the language of personal improvement and happiness, of increasing the intensities and power of life of those involved, that seems to recall the account of experience and ethics highlighted above in tracing a trajectory from Foucault to Spinozian ethics. I maintain that the force underpinning these actions and supporting them can be explained as an element of productive life that escapes the normalisation of conducts, behaviours and actions by power and carves out a space for spontaneous relations and modes of engagement with life to strive and emerge beyond the constraints imposed by discursive logics managing and representing the crisis. It is also significant that the language of this ethics does not deploy fixed core values of any written or established ethics (like responsibility, commitment, duty). Rather, it is played at the level of the affective encounters and concrete engagement experienced in the everyday conduct, gestures and practices of life. An ethics understood in terms of singularity seems to address this explanation and takes the encounter of other beings and forms of life as the fundamental condition that enables the experience of relationality, from which the further account of new or different modes of existence appears possible.

[72] Nevertheless, it needs to be noticed that, if it is true that it departs from the traditional universalising assumptions on which the ethics of human rights is built, the preliminary attitude and assumptions on which an ethics of singularity is grounded cannot either be equated to the radical commitment to the alterity of the other as it would appear in a Levinasian sense. In particular, the main difference between the account of ethics offered here and the one deriving from Levinas (1979) is the impossibility for the latter to escape a starting point of transcendence, that takes the other's alterity not as the experience and the very grounding of relationality but as an absolute principle from which relations and practices would follow.

This means not putting any *a priori* label or qualification of what modes of life should (or should not) count as legitimate, and thus reframes the problematic in radically different terms from a logic of inclusion and exclusion in which it inevitably remains prey when engaged in (bio)political or vitalist terms. The ethics of singularity allows to accommodate the idea that forms of being emerge primarily in a condition of relations and engagement, not as abstract principles, but as lived and situated experience taking place on the plane where the meaning attributed to life is established beyond the one imposed by normalising logics.

From the analysis performed above, it is thus possible to observe that the current treatment of the question of refugees by biopolitical or vitalist readings does leave room for the adoption of a different kind of ethics to deal with the engagement with life demonstrated by the empirical case discussed. This was particularly evident from the analysis of the shortcomings of existent literatures and approaches, which leads towards the rethinking and development of a critical perspective that can effectively open up the citizen-refugee relationship as an ethical problem for the purpose of a shift in ethical practice. The idea of an ethics of singularity works in such direction and provides an alternative and, in my reading, more suitable formulation for addressing the gaps left open in the previous approaches[73].

Secondly, I would maintain that the action of alternative conducts generated by the active response to life can also be read along the lines of the Spinozian materialist theory of ideas (elaborated via Sharp, 2014) explored above in the chapter. New and alternative ways of engaging with life at the level of specific situations and experiences generate new ideas that can be spread and modify the dominant and normalising practices and narratives constructed and produced by power. Ideas, therefore, can have a material force on reality and be able to modify the surrounding environment of relations and practices, thus introducing new ways of thinking and engaging with life. I argue that an ethics of singularity elaborated along the lines of the analysis above can offer a fruitful framework to explain the contingent modes of

[73] There may be suggestions that such different opening may found analogies with what is attempted by the idea of the politics of hospitality shaped after Derrida (2000, 2002), and, more broadly, of Kant's idea of hospitality (Kant, 1990; see also Nursoo, 2007), seen as giving a foundation of what establishes an ethical relationship between the citizen and the refugee in the first place (see also Baker, 2011 on the idea of hospitality as the ground for a new cosmopolitan political ethics). In my own account of ethics, however, there is more at stake. In fact, this alternative approach allows to speak of an ethics that is built beyond any possible category, any distinction between an inside and outside, since in an immanent definition of life there is no such distinction, but everything - and identities in particular - are rather seen in terms of *continuum*. This may thus open a further way that is still unexplored even in critical refugee studies as a problem common to question of ethics in IR.

practices and engagement with life that neither the perspectives of biopolitics nor those of vitalism are able to account for. Even if tentative, this example and application wants to suggest a context in which an idea of ethics of singularity can be applied and put into practice[74].

There remain several objections that could be made against this interpretation. I single out two as the most immediate and relevant for the consideration of the political application of such ethics. First, it could be asked what the political significance of such an ethics is and what, or whether, it can have an impact on the practice of politics at the formal and institutional level. Secondly, it could be argued that this type of solution does itself provide an uncritical response that preserves the status quo and shifts the responsibility from similar issue away from the political and governmental sphere. I will try to anticipate this possible criticism and bring the analysis to conclusion in the next chapter, by addressing more specifically the political implications of the framework of ethics of life here suggested.

Conclusion

After recalling the opening present in the biopolitical literature through Foucault and particularly the claim that a certain account of a vital dimension of life is seen by Foucault as part of the working of biopolitical mechanisms, Chapter 4 has looked at an alternative approach that can be seen to supplement Foucault's claims around the body and the affective dimension as the locus for resistance and critique. This has been identified with an ethics inspired by Spinoza's naturalist system of thought and emerging from current takes in contemporary Spinozism, like in Deleuze and further minor authors. In Chapter 3, I focused particularly on Foucault's theory of ethics and resistance to norms by looking at the specific concept of the *dispositif*. I

[74] It should be stressed out that, as mentioned, the analysis of the case does not mean to be comprehensive or exhaustive. I also acknowledge that the analysis could have been performed by using a different research design. I suggest that, more than a proper case study, the discussion above should be considered just as an exemplification of the conclusions that had been accomplished in the theoretical part of the enquiry. I shall also highlight that the interpretation offered from the lens of an ethics of singularity does not seek to invalidate other possible frameworks that have engaged with the topics beyond the scope of this enquiry (for instance, theories around the ideas of "hospitality", "responsibility" or "otherness"). More narrowly, it wanted to show how, in this area, ethics of singularity can provide an alternative to the weaknesses found in the conclusions of biopolitics and vitalism, which are the approaches that I have directly engaged from the beginning. To support the point that the explanation provided does not claim to replace or invalidate alternative approaches beyond the ones discussed here, I send back to the note regarding methodology in the introduction when, through Lemke (2011) and the notion of ontopolitics I noticed that each new definition or attempt at a new explanation (within the debate of the politics of life) should be aimed at sharpening its analytical role to address the blind spots and weak points of competing suggestions, and suggesting possible alternatives. This is the aim that the argument here has set out for the analysis.

argued that the idea of dispositives crucially helps conceptualise a space for an intervention of subjective freedom in opposition to norms - and thus the acknowledgment of the existence of a force intrinsic to life, which is seen co-extensive to biopolitical logics. This has been captured by the Foucauldian idea of critique.

In Chapter 4, I attempted a step towards a materialist treatment of the question of life and norms by looking at a Spinozist naturalist-materialist philosophy, and specifically at the system of immanent monism and materialist theory of ideas emerging from trends in the contemporary Spinozist turn. I have demonstrated how the conclusions that authors like Deleuze and Sharp read after Spinoza with regard to ethics are necessitated by and follow from the grounding metaphysical assumptions about the relation of thought and nature. I have insisted that recognising the power of thought that conceives itself as part of nature becomes crucial to open up alternative possibilities for living and acting. Far from being a move that subordinates or enslaves thought to the external forces of nature, the theories analysed see the expression and realisation of this enterprise as the way to realise the full freedom of one's being, as in Deleuze's reading. Within this complex conceptual system, I particularly emphasised the notion of an ecosystem of ideas, provided by Sharp, as a fruitful way to conceive of how one's existence and action can engage with, and eventually modify, the surrounding environment of dominant ideas or norms that characterise the status of being and acting in a particular context, thus challenging established qualifications of life. In particular, and in connection to the debate established in Part I, in this understanding, there is no need to distinguish between a natural or a social/human dimension of life, since forms of being in their deep relationality already participate in both. The interaction and possible modification of existent ideas and norms and the assessment of their intensities has been described as an ethical endeavour.

I tried to fulfil and summarise the account of ethics derived from Spinozian thought and its relational assumptions by deploying the term of singularity. This term helps conceive of forms of life beyond the divide of the discursive and the material, beyond the social and the natural that still seemed to structure the debate on the politics of life outlined in the schematics in Part I. The account of life that derives from it is more open and receptive, since it does not prescribe a value or meaning to life according to external and qualifying categories (as either those effected by power in biopolitics or still reproduced in an inverted sign in vitalism). Rather, it remains open and appreciative of the contingency and situatedness in which the shaping of modes

of life take place. This conclusion seems to provide a step beyond the schematic of the politics of life outlined in the first part of the thesis and the normalising (and normative) idea of life that the perspectives engaged developed. Finally, I tried to exemplify the formulation of an ethics of singularity here suggested by looking at the case of refugees. Even though tentative and certainly incomplete, I argued that the latter can provide a useful case to show, first, the inadequacy of the frameworks of biopolitics and vitalism explored in the schematic of the politics of life seen in Part I. Secondly, I argued that the framework developed along the lines of an ethics of singularity seems better equipped to explain and justify cases that reveal more receptive and less rigid modes of engagement with life and with the value attributed to it, and which the former approaches leave outside of their discussion. I also acknowledged the criticism that could be moved against the reading here proposed.

The following and final part of the thesis, then, will need to ask how it is possible to make this more open account to life accomplished through an ethics of singularity productive for the rethinking of life in contemporary political practices. That means, how it is possible to incorporate an ethics of singularity in the shaping of political relations and to influence contemporary politics. The final chapter sets out to address this last question.

Part III | The Political Life of Norms: A Practice

Chapter 5
Ethics of Singularity in Practice

Introduction

The analysis in Part II opened up an alternative trajectory in the debate around the politics of life mapped out at the beginning of this thesis. The latter was structured around a qualification of life between natural and political that, presented by biopolitics, seemed not to be fully overcome by perspectives of vitalism either. The enquiry I developed by returning to Foucault and expanding his work through the naturalist thought derived by Spinozist approaches tried to move beyond the divide and enquire into other possibilities for a qualification of life beyond normalising processes of power. The previous chapter explored the route of an ethics that ascribes value to life starting from the affective and contingent experience in which life is encountered and not reducible either to the object of a power exercised over it nor to the agent of a pure power of life.

The final chapter aims at anticipating and addressing possible criticisms and clarifying some limits that could be advanced against the argument that has been made. In this aim, the analysis will first try to further situate the idea of an ethics of singularity elaborated here in a broader category, which will be qualified as a "dispositional ethics" and which appears to emerge in debates in political theory. This step has two objectives: first, it contextualises the enquiry performed and argues for its relevance for current debates in the field. Secondly, it helps point out some problems that may appear unresolved in the account of ethics elaborated in Part II: namely, the lack of a thorough and systematic engagement with the question of power; the apparent individualistic drift that an ethics so understood could appear to enhance, and, finally, the possible connections and impact of such ethics on macro-scale socio-political conditions and events.

In the chapter, I will try to provide an answer to these problems by referring primarily to the work of William Connolly. In fact, Connolly, with his development of an ethics of critical responsiveness that informs political and democratic relationships,

helps show how the ethics of life above outlined can be productively integrated into politics. This is enabled by his reflections around the formulation and practice of an ethos aimed at renegotiating modes of existence (with one another and with one self), while simultaneously not neglecting the question of the role that power plays in this enterprise. In this way, the study also brings to conclusion the problem around the exercise of (bio)political power (and its exclusionary and classificatory effects upon forms of life) that was set up at the very beginning of the enquiry in Chapter 1. Looking at Connolly's work, thus, helps me accomplish the integration of the ethics of life outlined above into the practice of politics and to show how it can potentially influence and affect also macro-scale, institutional dynamics.

To this aim, the chapter is structured as follow: first, I will position the account of the ethics of singularity elaborated here in a broader category of forms of "dispositional ethics", which has been given attention in political theory and political studies. This part of the analysis helps identify some of the limits that still remain attached to such approaches, especially when compared to alternative perspectives on ethics. The analysis will also clarify what is meant here by politics and how the analysis outlined above can be made productive in informing political action. Then, the following sections will engage with the work of William Connolly as a position that helps further develop the conclusions of the enquiry previously conducted. After discussing some general premises to Connolly's work (especially in regard to his philosophy of abundance; his ethics of cultivation and the vision of micropolitical action that he advocates), I will discuss how he deals with and potentially provides an answer to some of the limits unresolved in the conclusions previously reached. I will look at his engagement with the question of power; the defence from claims of drifting into a merely individualistic ethical gesture, and the possibility for his ethico-politics to play a concrete influence on macro-political structures. Through the support of Connolly's analysis, I will try to demonstrate how the approach to a politics of life outlined in the previous part of the analysis can be made politically productive.

Ethics of singularity as dispositional ethics

The previous steps of the analysis have highlighted the role that ethics plays in enhancing an engagement with forms of existence beyond the qualifications ascribed to them by biopolitical mechanisms. Such ethics goes beyond traditional ethical

conceptions grounded on a set of norms or rules derived from fixed or pre-given standards, or ensuing from established and solid systems of morality (see Bennett, 2001; McCormack, 2003; Connolly, 1999 in this regard). Jane Bennett grasps this point by noticing that:

> What seems to cause the most alarm [in rising perspectives of ethics, *my addition*] is the refusal to define ethics primarily in terms of a code or 'prescriptive ensemble' of values, rules of action, and criterion of judgment. Many models of ethics are based on the undemonstrated presumption that if one does not endorse a command ethics one can have no ethics at all, that only a code-centered model can ensure a care for others. (Bennett, 2001: 152).

In this regard, Chapter 4 has repeatedly pointed out that, in a Spinozist fashion, an ethics rejecting solidified systems of morality tends to be understood as an attitude, a disposition, a cultivation that derives from one's being situated in a certain configuration of relations, and thus breaking with any link to codified systems of norms or principles. This can be explained by the fact that, as seen, in a biopolitical reading, an ethics or moral system that hinges solely on defined and fixed principles can itself be identified with a mechanism of control by power. In order to grasp such approach to ethics (which could also be defined as "non-foundational" or a "weak" ethics, see Pin-Fat, 2010; White, 2002; Barad, 2010), Beausoleil has put forth the concept of a "dispositional" ethics (2017). As I demonstrate in what follows, this seems to provide a useful term to categorise emergent understandings of ethics that capture the following alternative conception: an ethics understood as a way of being and acting and ushering from the affective-cognitive bond with other beings and with the world.

I will now comment briefly on the account of a dispositional ethics in order to argue that the ethics of singularity outlined above can be subsumed under this broader category of analysis. The aim of this move is to show that an ethics of singularity formulated by the thesis so far seems to find room in this broader characterisation present in contemporary theorising. More importantly, for the sake of the last step of the analysis here, such formulation also helps conceptualise some of the problems that may remain unaddressed in the type of ethics described by the thesis. In the rest of the chapter, I will then turn to the work of William Connolly to show how his thought can help provide an answer to the impasses that still remain open in the account of ethics discussed.

In a recent article titled "Responsibility as Responsiveness: Enacting a Dispositional Ethics of Encounter", Emily Beausoleil (2017) argues for the emergence of the idea of a dispositional ethics as a trend retraceable in diverse and recent approaches in political theory. To quote the author:

> A dispositional ethics offers a mean to prepare oneself for what is currently beyond one's grasp, or maybe, that is not there yet; to renegotiate the ever-shifting balance between reliance on established terms with which to make sense and evaluate the world, and the need to call these frames into question to truly encounter what is "other"; to perceive and respond with care within even the most difficult moments of encounter that result too often in disavowal, defensiveness or revenge (Beausoleil, 2017: 298).

The ethical approach presented here seems to show connections with the elaboration of the thesis. Here, the key problem presented is the engagement with otherness and with alterity, in a way that goes beyond an immediate attitude of defence, shielding or opposition, as it would derive from a starting point of a defined identities or system of values. In fact, many of the terms and concepts that are pointed out here: the contingency and uncertainty experienced in the encounter of the "other", the ideas of responsiveness and the apparently immediate attachment to fixed forms of identity and being that can cause reactionary responses seem to recall the characteristics of an ethics of singularity.

Going deeper, I have argued that the problematic set out at the beginning of my enquiry in regard to the biopolitical qualification of "worthy" lives started from a concern seen even as prior to the moment of encounter with a fully-forged otherness. The argument wanted to express the necessity of an attitude and an action which is prior even to the very moment in which practices of othering, exclusions, and often de-humanisations are established in the first place. In my argument, putting oneself in a dispositional ethics open to the appreciation of the singularity of worth of one's (and other's) life means primarily exiting that circle by which forms of life can be approached in classificatory terms. The latter move, in fact, was seen as inevitably leading either to an inclusion of certain forms of life, and, therefore, a normalisation within the logics of the biopolitical regime, or to their exclusion, and thus their utter degradation from any political significance or meaning.

In order to contrast such exclusionary outcomes, the notion of singularity tries to capture an engagement with each form of life before any definition or classification

(in the name of its infinite diversity and uniqueness)[75]. Life is neither conceived as a form of power *over* only, nor as the pure expression of a power *of*. Rather, singularity captures that the engagement with forms of life and their formation depends on the situated systems of relations in which one finds oneself embedded. By so doing, I suggest reformulating and addressing the problematic in a new fashion, by escaping the circle that inevitably repeats binary qualifications as the first response to the encounter with life. In this regard, the formulation of an ethics of this kind pursues the aim of refocusing the ethical project of engagement with forms of life beyond the ones that are normalised (and thus made legitimate) by biopolitical apparatuses. This ethics sees the engagement with life in a more open and appreciative sense, in a way that the biopolitical perspectives analysed at the beginning were seen to have neither the space nor the capacity to acknowledge or conceptualise.

Moreover, another characteristic shared with the broader category of dispositional ethics (Beausoleil, 2017) is the attention put on the dimension of practices, or praxis, in which such ethics becomes enacted. By advocating an attitude which is able to affect, act upon, and change one's surrounding, a dispositional ethics is primarily enacted and performed at the level of concrete practices and behaviours that can be decided solely within the specific situation or circumstance. For this reason, the broader understanding of such an ethics is that of a concrete and punctual engagement as a disposition vis-a-vis all circumstances of life, in order to realise such

[75] It could be argued that the term singularity has already been used by other authors. For Derrida (2000, 2002), "singularity" also captures the absolute uniqueness of every entity and its equality of being before any determination. It expresses everyone's status "before any 'subject', […] beyond all citizenship, beyond every 'state', every 'people', indeed, even beyond the current state of definition of a living being as a living "human" being" (Derrida, 2003:120). Even though similar in its outcomes, I argue that my analysis differs from Derrida's use of the term, for which the idea remains linked to his discussions on friendship, hospitality and "the other" (2000, 2002). Therefore, even though with similar outcomes, the trajectory from which I derive the term remains profoundly different from Derrida's, by looking at Foucault and contemporary Spinozism to define an engagement with life in a condition of immanence. In my analysis, I emphasise in particular the condition of relationality from which forms of being acquire meaning. Therefore, there is no being that can be directly defined as a "citizen", a "people" or even "human" and, crucially for the example I analysed, as foreigner, migrant, exiled, deported or state-less (connecting this also to the biopolitical categories seen in Chapter 1). The attention on relationality helps solve another possible objection to an apparent paradox inherent to the notion itself: if every mode of life is seen as absolutely singular, then, it may be questioned how it is possible to grasp it at all. The answer to such apparent contradiction comes again from the condition in which singularities are conceived: even though fundamentally unique, singularities are never entirely isolated but, as said, they are always linked and in relation to others. Their existence depends on the contextual dimension. Borrowing a clarification from Nancy (2000), singularity can be called as such only if already immersed in the plural, only when it exists with and among others, as it appeared clear in a Spinozist environment of modes and ideas. Singularity, thus, presupposes already a way of "being-with", where the form of being of one strongly depends on the relationships it establishes with others and with the surrounding environment of relations. Moreover, such being must be conceived in its concrete, material, corporeal terms, which enter into an affective relation with the surroundings. There is therefore an open-ended idea of relationality that underpins such approach. My analysis, therefore, differs from the authors mentioned since it is not framed as a problem of "otherness", but as a question of defining an ethics of life in immanence, which is the dimension that the analysis above has opened.

shaping of conducts. This has been described as the action through Sharp's notion of an "ecosystems of ideas" developed after Spinoza, that comes to complete and reread a biopolitical structuring of life by means of *dispositifs* regulating and normalising life through processes from within. The aim of an ethics understood as a disposition that influences practices (as seen also when put in relation with previous conceptions of ethical and moral systems) is the turning of fixed moral codes into a situated ethics which is able to build into, but also, to challenge, counteract and resist such established systems of norms.

In relation to this point, another important dimension I emphasised is the attention put on the re-evaluation of the dimension of the body and corporeal experience as a vehicle and locus for affective existence. The source of such reconsideration was drawn from a Spinozist ethics and an understanding of human beings and the role of reason addressed in the previous chapter. As argued, more than a reduction or a downplaying of the idea of reason, what Spinozian thought (especially through Deleuze) achieves is an integration of the mental and the corporeal part of the individual, an understanding of being in a more holistic and integral sense, which conceives of mind and body as two different attributes of the same substance. The affective dimension of (human) beings becomes thus re-evaluated and reconsidered in line of such account. Reconnecting to what was said above in regard to the capacity of an ethics shaped after Spinoza to modify the surrounding environment, "affects might be worked upon until they soften calcified responses and yield previously foreclosed alternatives" (Beausoleil, 2017: 308). What is at stake is a deep questioning of positions advocating a strong account of the self (drawn from a Cartesian understanding) seen as bounded and therefore threatened by difference. Rather, an ethical approach defined as singularity and here definable in terms of a dispositional ethics portrays the self as "multidimensional and in continual formation" (Beausoleil, 2017: 300), and ultimately open to the appreciation of singularity[76].

What is left to investigate, however, is the position and role that a dispositional ethics, in which an ethics of singularity is gathered, can play in regard to political practices. In fact, a dispositional ethics as the one defined here appears not to be systematically transposable into the political field, since the commitment to receptivity

[76] It is important to notice, however, that such a different approach to modes of being does not exclude an agonistic attitude, which remains open to contestation and change. This will be the point expanded particularly via the reference to Connolly's work in the following part of the chapter.

and responsiveness (as also necessary ways of being) cannot be just endorsed and accepted willingly. By presenting itself as mainly a disposition and attitude, it could be argued that such an ethics seems to neglect any deeper reflection on the effect that power and historical conditions play in structuring relations, and generating instances of injustice. In other words, the reconsideration of the self in broader terms that attend a materialist rethinking of the body and affects needs to go hand in hand with a "rigorous interrogation of other contextual factors that structure encounters and parties' habitual responses within them, if they are to be usefully – and ethically employed in political life" (Beausoleil, 2017:313). In this regard, it appears necessary to finally spell out what is understood here by "politics". I addressed this point in the Introduction already and argued that, with the biopolitical shift from the law to the norm – and of the administering of social processes not in a separate artificial sphere of politics but through the relations operating in society – any response of biopolitics *already* entails an action at the level of the relations and practices that regulate living. This seems now supported by Beausoleil, who argues that:

> politics exists, is reinforced and challenged, in the capillaries of the everyday and *at the level of gestures, practices and bodies*. Acknowledgment of such micro-politics is arguably one reason an ethical approach to politics, and a dispositional ethics in particular, has grown as field of enquiry in recent years (given the role of the impersonal and, more specifically, the body in structuring relations of difference) (Beausoleil, 2017: 314, my emphasis).

A dispositional ethics is here advocated as a counterpart (and, possibly, necessary complement) to structural and collective approaches to politics, by cultivating the sensibilities that precede and support such relations, law and institutions, as well as providing the terms with which to hold this ideal and practices to greater account.

This latter point, finally, adds another consideration also about the positioning of such an ethics in regard to the task of critique, which has been touched on already in Chapter 3 and 4. A dispositional type of ethics is not disengaged from political problems. Rather, it could be conceived as additional to standard methods and moments of critique. To put it in the author's words: the emphasis and re-evaluation of the body and of the material/affective dimension of life (which ultimately prioritises the embodiment of political encounters, along with their intellectual and cognitive character) could and should "work in tandem with more conventional lines of political

critique[77], hence to see critique in novel and promising ways". This means "cultivating strategies […] that might be applied or adopted to more politicised and conflictual contexts" (Beausoleil, 2017: 313). Ultimately, according to the author, this attitude should derive from the awareness and commitment to an ethos that remains open to encounters. Beausoleil, however, does not expand or substantiate what this would mean in terms of concrete attitudes and actions and, ultimately, how it could be put into practice. In what follows, I will try to develop the argument of how to incorporate this idea of ethics into political dynamics by drawing from the work of William Connolly.

To summarise, although I do not disagree with the conclusions reached by Beausoleil in characterising emergent alternative understandings of ethics under the label of "dispositional", I maintain that further analysis and development is required in order to make this understanding politically productive, that means, to ask how they can effectively interact with formal and institutional politics, by supplementing and reinforcing them. In order to address the aspects that the discussion of a dispositional ethics brings to light, I finally look at the work of William Connolly. A reference to the position of William Connolly helps address the problematic aspects still open in the perspective mentioned above. More specifically, through the analysis of Connolly, I try to demonstrate how the ethical disposition outlined can productively feed into a kind of action able to affect current socio-political phenomena. In this regard, his work is particularly significant because it inserts the practices of ethics and micropolitical forms of action ushering from an ethos of critical engagement and responsiveness into macropolitical structures and dynamics.

Politicising ethics: William Connolly

Connolly's name is primarily known in political theory for his contribution to the democratic tradition and for his works on agonistic democracy and pluralism (Connolly, 1991, 1995, 1999). More recently, however, he has also shown an openness to themes and approaches that to a certain extent overlap with the questions addressed by natural vitalisms and that he sometimes defines as an "immanent naturalism",

[77] This claim seems to be further substantiated and reinforced by the statement that "critique (as conventionally understood) is not enough" (Bryant, 2016) as well as to the idea of "positive critique" that has been attached to Foucault's idea of experience (Blencowe, 2012), as I have previously pointed out.

elaborated mainly in *A World of Becoming* (2010), *The Fragility of Things* (2013) and his most recent *Facing the Planetary* (2016).

As a guide to the analysis carried here, I maintain that it is not entirely appropriate to neatly distinguish between two phases of the author's work and that, to a large extent, the conclusions reached in his latest works are consistent with the theses developed at the earlier stages of his theory (and particularly in the works *Identity/Difference*, 1991; *The Ethos of Pluralisation*, 1995 and *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, 1999). I therefore read his work in an integrated fashion and establish a close connection between what could appear as two separate phases.

Stephen White has suggested treating Connolly's theory as an example of "weak ontology" (White, 2010: 106) whereby the author refuses universalising and essentialising assertions about "being". However, certain underlying assumptions about the ideas of the self, the other and the world are not totally absent, and the author postulates a form of richness and abundance that infuses his idea of the world and being (Connolly,1991). Connolly's starting field of interest is the realm of social relations, where intersubjective and, specifically, *democratic* forms of interactions take place. In his latest works, then, this abundance is expanded to the whole dimension of the world itself as infused by multiple degrees of complexity (Connolly, 2010). He defines reality as "a protean vitality of being" (Connolly, 2005a: 244-245), according to which the world is neither a container of "matter to be used" nor the manifestation of some intrinsic purpose (as it could be in forms of transcendence or teleology), but rather an unmanageable "presencing of diverse energies and strange vitalities" that at times cross subjective experience (Connolly, 1995:16). Abundance, thus, marks an appreciation of the richness of things and of worldly phenomena that goes beyond the limits and boundaries of the self and its sphere of existence (Connolly, in Tonder and Thomassen, 2005). This is translated in an attitude of generosity to others and in an appreciation, openness and engagement with other's differences (understood as ways of existence, choices, systems of beliefs…)[78]. In this regard, Connolly's philosophy has been also labelled as a "materialist pluralism" (Khan, 2009; Cudworth and Hobden, 2017). This is defined as a multidimensional pluralism understood as an excess or abundance of energies and "protean material forces" of life

[78] In fact, Nietzsche is the source of Connolly's take on immanence here (Nietzsche, 1966, 1967a, 1967b). In his reading of Nietzsche, the call for a life of joy derives from the acceptance of the contingency and uncertainty that pertain to immanence, precisely in virtue of the lack of a superior transcendent design that would shape an absolute meaning of human life. This inspires a generosity and gratitude for being, amongst the sufferings that life can bring.

that exist without an intrinsic finality or end and that, particularly, are not amenable to any human control or capture by any social organisation of human and things alike.

Nevertheless, abundance is also associated with the sense of fragility and vulnerability produced by what the (individual) subject can master and comprehend. Abundance also entails contingency, which invites to remain open to emergent and ever-changing dynamics (in the natural-and-social worlds as necessarily intertwined, Connolly, 2005: 144). Crucially for my analysis, though, a philosophy of abundance does not need to be linked to a mood of positivity or general "optimism" – a definition that could be attributed to the perspectives of vitalism. Rather, the contingency that accompanies a sense of abundances entails also the possibility of conflictual, uncertain, and often even damaging outcomes[79]. This latter point seems to resonate more with Canguilhem understanding of the "error" of life, that is, a life that escapes representations and is not assigned any pre-determined sign.

The premises just outlined in regard to Connolly's ontology are important for my analysis in two directions. First, they pave the way to Connolly's ensuing claims in regard to the shaping of his ethics and politics. The same experience of generativity and abundance, in fact, is applied to political encounters, as fundamental condition to start performing political relations[80]. This leads him to formulate the idea of an ethics of "critical responsiveness" as the way in which the openness to encounter, differences and uncertainty can be embraced and performed in daily relationships (both at an individual and a collective level). Secondly, such grounding view situates the connection between the self and the world at the level of "micro" dynamics, which disclose the self's interconnection with reality. At the very basis of Connolly's theory, there is a key notion of "micro-politics", which is attentive to the micro-scale dynamics taking place below the level of individual beings. The experience and performance of micro-processes and dynamics starts well before, in the visceral, inner level of the affective existence. The primary response can coincide only with an equally intimate process of "work on the self" that involves a variety of complex activities.

[79] This is the criticism considered against the types of vitalism discussed in Chapter 2. Moreover, in this regard, it is significant that Nietzsche, who Connolly considers the philosopher of abundance *per excellence*, attributes to the kind of life derived from his own philosophical outlook the character of "tragedy" (Nietzsche, 1966), meaning that sad passions and experiences may not be absent from it.

[80] In this regard, Connolly takes issue in particular with a liberal understanding of the subject (Connolly, 1999). Relying on the image of the self as autonomous individual, political liberalism portrays an idea of the agent as disengaged and self-fulfilled, thus neglecting to clarify its ontological premises (expressed particularly by his concept of "ontopolitics", 1992). I showed how the concept can be brought beyond its original context of application and used as analytical and critical tool to discuss any political statement or position and the relevance of their ontological premises.

Connolly's aim in elaborating a concrete ethico-political project starts from the development of an *ethos,* or *sensitivity,* that makes the subject open to the experience of the uncanny and to seeing it as a (self-)generative performative moment (Connolly, 1991). A possible responsive action therefore needs to start at the smallest level of these interconnections, in the micro-sphere of the self: dynamics and intensities operate partially beyond the direct reach of consciousness, although they can also influence conduct and thought.

Critical responsiveness and ethics of cultivation

As I have just outlined, the embracing of an ontology of abundance leads to the discussion of ethics in Connolly's project. The author tries to systematically build an affirmative stance and advocates an attitude of generosity and openness to the emergent and uncanny of life. Far from remaining disengaged or prey to feelings of anxiety, Connolly's subject is rather moved by a sense of "gratitude for the rich abundance of life" (Connolly, 1995: 28).

At this point, the author turns to the implications that abundance entails for subjects' ethical approach: such gratitude constitutes a "source of ethical aspiration (towards a) protean care for the world" (Connolly, 2010: 82) and towards further efforts to deeper and multiple forms of engagement. The leap to the ethical dimension positions the subject in the broader order of things. Ethics derives from the relationality that links one to others and to the world. The medium that enables this connection is the sensibility or spirit that puts the individual in a mode of "receptivity" towards oneself (of her own internal affective-cognitive processes) as well as towards others. These elements seem thus to confirm the outcomes reached by the analysis I performed in the previous stages of the research.

Importantly, the initial dimension of the self becomes central to define *(micro)political* action. In the author's thought, the subject is encouraged "to work demurely on a relational self that has already been formed" (Connolly, 1999:146). The self is not invented anew nor determined merely by external phenomena, being them cultural practices or institutional principles and habits. Rather, it constantly responds, and reacts critically to processes and phenomena that are already taking place and that at some point cross the level of awareness; this reveals its being attuned to a broader set of relations. The specific feeling introduced by Connolly to name this sentiment is

that of a "critical responsiveness" to the prefiguration of a generosity, initially towards emergent political identities and movements and then to any beings and entities found in reality as such (Connolly, 2010; 2013a; 2013b).

The attribute of "critical responsiveness" is a necessary element for the conceptualisation of Connolly's idea of political subjectivity. As I have highlighted, its first formulation and deployment occur in the author's democratic theory, where this attitude is seen as a fundamental means for conceiving of intersubjective relations and political *differences* (Connolly, 1991). The same conclusions derived from the ontological premises, however, can be extended to support the kind of action (and, eventually, politics) that the author rearticulates in regard to the global dimension.

The idea of critical responsiveness is useful for my reading because it well captures the attitude in which the individual finds itself positioned in the broader milieu and environment. In Chapter 4, I presented the notion of an ecology of ideas (developed after Sharp's formulation, 2011) to express the way in which one relates to and acts in regard to its surrounding environment – with the possibility of transforming it. An attitude of openness and responsiveness was there necessary to capture this interconnectedness and the response to sets of norms, understood as the established and dominant organisation of relations and identities produced by biopolitical discourses and dispositifs. Continuing on this, in Connolly, responsiveness is thus a necessary element to engage with one's environment. Most importantly for my argument, it paves the way to that openness and receptivity that allows one first to recognise and then, eventually, to expose and to challenge the constructed, contingent and often totalising ways in which certain classifications and qualifications of forms of life are established and reproduced.

The complementary element with which Connolly completes his ethical project is that of "cultivation", with which to enhance and develop an attitude of openness towards plurality and multiplicity. This involves an attention to the multiple and intertwined registers of being through which the world is experienced. The attitude of the political subject is a continuous cultivation of one's own life, in order to make oneself sensitive and open to new forms of engagement. I maintain that the idea of "cultivation", which Connolly defines as his specific mode of ethics, can capture the attitude to enhance ways of being that are not (yet) accounted for and - to put it in the words in which I formulated the enquiry here - recognised into established norms and

practices. To quote the author, what is cultivated are "possibilities of being imperfectly installed in established institutional practices" (Connolly, 1993: 371).

Yet, I distinguish my analysis from Connolly's conclusions in this regard in two ways: first, his analysis still identifies "possibilities of being" specifically in the forms of identity – even though this focus is possibly partially loosened and expanded in his latest works. Rather, the argument around an ethics of singularity captures forms of life more broadly, before they can even be crystalised and defined by specific identities. In fact, one of the problems that was set up in the opening debate about biopolitics was precisely that of a qualification of forms of life leading often to exclusionary outcomes. The concern there was that certain ways of existence are not even recognised as forms of life in the first place. This was put as the starting problem to be addressed, as the need for a more open way to conceptualise and engage with forms of being – before their definition in specific identities. It has been suggested that the concept of singularity can help escape this pending problem and address it at a prior level. Entering into relations with other beings cannot be seen as a problem of identity only but of recognising and engaging with them in their striving for existence and survival. This was emphasised through the theses borrowed from Canguilhem and Spinozist theories in particular.

Secondly and related to this, the level at which an ethics of singularity wishes to act is not that of "institutional practices" only, as it appears in Connolly's quote above. Rather, it tackles a broader understanding of "norms" and normalising systems resulting from regimes of biopolitical domination that are active at a much more diverse and multi-layered set of practices, comprising of habits, ways of thinking and, ultimately, everyday life.

"Cultivation" is therefore the preliminary step to recognise the contingency and constructed character of certain practices of normalisation and acknowledge the rich abundance of life-forms that always exceed the particular classification and configuration which is imposed by the biopolitical structuring of society. To put this in the words of Connolly: "The excess of life over identity provides the fugitive source from which one comes to appreciate, and perhaps love, the anarchy of being amidst the organisation of identity/difference" (Connolly, 1993: 372). As said, in my reading, the problem is not circumscribed to that of identity-and-difference only but is rather the prior one of being recognised the status of a form of life (not as improper, or "threshold figure") in the first place. An ethics of singularity acquires a political

valence since it is able to challenge at the very roots the way in which biopolitical rationales function.

Also in an ethics of singularity, therefore, there remains an element of cultivation as a stage and dimension that enables the practice of this attitude. This element leads to the idea of a work or "micro-politics" of the self to develop the sensitivity and openness which enable to remain attentive and responsive to the plurality and vitality or forms of being (and, simultaneously, to existent apparatuses of exclusion) to which one has access to, starting from its own network of relations and interconnections. Because of the analysis outlined, thus, Connolly's theory of critical responsiveness and cultivation proves particularly useful to support the point of the rethinking of the qualification and engagement with modes of life explored by the thesis.

The two dimensions of micropolitics

As just mentioned, cultivation and critical responsiveness are the key pillars on which Connolly develops his idea of ethics. This opens to how this ethics can be then politicised, that means, be applied in renegotiating forms of engagement, identities, and practices – which can be scaled up to produce changes at the macro/institutional level. The natural continuation and enactment of an ethics of cultivation and care lead therefore to the practice of a micropolitics. I proceed with outlining the relevance and meaning of micropolitics and the two main directions in which, in my argument, it should be understood. These correspond to the micropolitical engagement of one with oneself (as a cultivation of the connections and mutual influences among one's registers of being) and, secondly, micropolitics in relations to others – and yet still before the level of institutional and macro-scale structures. I will discuss these two meanings in the following.

First, the application and practice of micropolitics concerns the sphere of the self. Internal processes and phenomena are characterised by the same contingency that pertains to the external world and that applies also to one's own way of being through its different levels (intellectual/cognitive and affective emotional primarily). Here in particular, it alludes to the non-voluntary character of one's identity, something that cannot be controlled by the will. To quote the author:

> A branded contingency is a formation that has become instinctive, even though it might not be reducible to instinct as a biological drive. Indeed, the term "contingency" as it is used here in no ways implies that a contingency is always something that can be changed through will or decision (Connolly, 1991:176).

Significantly for my analysis, this applies also to the dynamics inherent to the formation of the self. In *Neuropolitics* (2002a), Connolly lays the ground to his idea of micropolitics in relation to oneself and one's faculties. The work aims at enquiring the role that techniques and disciplines of one's own dispositions play in producing certain attitudes and habits of thinking, ethics and politics. The practice and cultivation of such attitudes start at the level of the individual self. The broader problem addressed by the book, thus, is how the response to broader cultural practices and especially techniques of self-cultivation infiltrate into and eventually stimulate patterns of thinking, identity and ethical dispositions that redefine also how one relates to the external world and to others (Connolly, 2002a).

In fact, the micropolitics of the cultivation of the self feeds into and renews the same disposition towards higher degrees of openness and engagement with certain situations and with others. A micropolitics as a work on techniques of the self (in fact, an element that Connolly here closely borrows from and develops after Foucault, 1978, 1990) is therefore the first and necessary stage through which a genuine ethics of engagement can be developed and enacted. The outcome is to work and problematise the fixed and often taken-for-granted, "consecrated" character attributed to one's identity, which prevents and closes down the appreciation of the contingency and multiplicity of modes of being.

Significant for my analysis, however, is also the idea of the self and the individual that emerges from such a conception. In fact, the practice of composing ways of feeling and thinking in order to enhance new and more open ways to engage with one's milieu aims at bridging the rational/intellectual and affective/natural dimension of human beings. This attempt, therefore, sounds very much in line with the unified and holistic account of the individual and being that I have emphasised particularly when analysing the ethics offered by Spinozist accounts in Chapter 4 in unitary and monistic account of mind and body.

Connolly's conclusions in this regard support the idea of human nature that was highlighted as a corollary of an ethics of singularity and that here I return to emphasise. To quote Connolly, these insights into a new awareness on techniques and

connections that are discovered and enhanced by means of cultivation, "can inform the reflective techniques we apply to ourselves to stimulate thought, to complicate judgment, to refine ethical sensibility" (Connolly, 2002: 13).

The definition of the self can thus be seen as relational and deeply embedded in the modes of affective-physical existence. The overall formation of one's identity could even be conceived as "biocultural": it mixes nature and culture into corporeal sensitivities that belong to the physical dimension of the self. Therefore, Connolly consequently suggests that an "ethic of cultivation" is "an orientation in which relational arts of the self are crafted to work on particular aspects of one's biocultural identity" (Connolly, 1999:173). This helps account for those processes, like feelings of attachment, that take place at the visceral level of identity and influence action and judgments, but fall beyond direct intellectual regulation[81].

Using this to corroborate the thesis of an ethics of singularity supported here, such disposition (achieved through a more unitary understanding of the working of one's registers and faculties) becomes necessary to modify the attitude towards one's environment and thus making it more open, sensitive and appreciative of the existence of ways of life (or, conversely, their exclusions) and thus ultimately attempting to modify it.

The idea of micropolitics derives therefore from the emphasis on the embodied character of Connolly's politics. By analysing his work on neuropolitics (see also Khan, 2009) it emerges how the author does not exclude any dimension and register of being and derives his conclusions from the combination of both affective and cognitive processes as well as physiological dynamics of the brain in generating new ways of thinking, without yet ever reducing them only to the latter. In this regard, Connolly's position can be traced back again to the definition of a materialist pluralism that was introduced earlier in the analysis and that can be here read in the functioning of material processes of the brain, the body and ultimately, in the ensuing idea of the

[81] This portrays a conception which is very far from an attitude derived only in specific sites as the higher intellect or the rational-moral will as in post-Kantian theories of ethics. Moreover, also in this case, this characterisation of ethics and the self distinguishes the author's account of ethics from the notion of morality. Ethics manifests the disposition of questioning one's own identity and the consequent willingness to further negotiate it through the series of multiple encounters with other beings and entities. Morality, on the contrary, seems rather associated with a code of standard rules that shapes the judgments upon good and bad as given and intrinsic absolute values. Morality is derived strictly by a supposed transcendent moral nature of the subject (in a Kantian sense) and therefore taken as universal and immutable. In contrast to this, ethics emerges as immanent, coherently with the contingent character which is associated with identity. The mismatch between ethics and morality becomes even more evident when shifting to the political ground. Ethics translates into the disposition of problematising and questioning moral givens, in order to reach the "real" and always contingent mode of being of a society (resulting from the combination of its particular contingent mutual relations).

self. In this first acceptation, then, micropolitics refers to the visceral, internal level of the individual work on the self, produced by the connection of all emotional, affective and cognitive level.

In addition, there is a second meaning in which the idea of micropolitics in Connolly should be understood. The modes experienced internally across the several registers of being need to be enhanced and transformed into a permanent disposition, which allows one to work on, form and remain open to the formation and transformation of one's surrounding milieu. This for Connolly passes through the use of "tactics of the self" to realise an action understood as a "micropolitics". Again quoting the author:

> It is also to set up the possibility that these entrenchments might be recomposed modestly through artfully devised tactics of the self and its collective sibling, micropolitics […]. Relational tactics of the self are applied to affective dispositions below the reach of direct intellectual self-regulation. So is their collective partner, micropolitics (Connolly, 1991: xvii).

The idea of micropolitics must thus be understood also more broadly as the action taken at the level of the relations below the state and formal institutions. As a necessary continuation of the cultivated disposition towards the self, the emergence of new ways of thinking and ethics that derive from it are transposed, translated and infused into the way in which one relates to others and to the world. In this regard, Connolly himself defines micropolitics as the way in which "certain professional practices and institutions display certain (disciplinary) techniques to individually and collectively organize attachments that inscribe particular relations within individuals and between others" (Connolly, 2002: 21). Tracing back this analysis to the introduction of the ways of operating and functioning of biopolitical logics, it appears clear how the latter work by means of the capillary structuring and qualifying of the social sphere, and thus deciding on and producing the modes of life that can legitimately take part in it.

Borrowing from the work initiated in this regard by Foucault (1977, 1998), the response to those dynamics cannot but be worked at the same capillary and micro-level. Micropolitics amounts therefore to the critical engagement with the pressures and forces of normalisation which aim at enforcing "standards of normality into the self, the group and the nation" (Connolly, 1995: 190) and challenges them also at the level that precedes their institutionalisation into stable and fixed modes of account and

recognition. Connolly and other commentators (see Kahn, 2009) even consider this attitude and practice of micropolitics as the source for a *revolutionary* action, which passes through the level of the practices and relations of the everyday life and aims at opposing, resisting and ultimately modifying those structures and norms that are toxic and detrimental in their exclusionary and totalising outcomes.

This double reading of the idea of micropolitics is therefore meaningful for my argument around an ethics of singularity in a two-fold sense. First, it supports an idea of the self as being whose capacity of thinking and reason is not limited to the cognitive sphere only, but embraces a broader and more dynamic understanding and account of the affective, visceral and experiential dimension of existence. This appears in line with the idea of the individual emerged in particular from the analysis of Spinozist thought and the ethics ushering from a monistic ontological outlook. Secondly, it makes explicit how practices of counter-actions and ethics of care and singularity are aimed primarily at challenging outcomes of normalisation of identities, being and forms of existence that, has seen, biopolitical logics contribute to establish – thus hindering a richer and more receptive account of life.

Through the reading of Connolly's micropolitics (2005), the self is able to unleash and develop certain energies and impulses that, in my reading, can counter tendencies to normalisation. The latter are eventually further channelled and expressed to liberate the same energies that can derive from the encounter and dynamics generated by relations with other beings or situations, and elaborate on the disposition and practices that can attend more genuinely the kinds of life that escape, are overlooked or even suppressed by biopolitical structures of governing.

Ethics in practice: the response to vitalism and biopolitics

After providing the overview of Connolly's theory and the way in which it relates to the analysis I performed, it is now possible to clarify the further impasses and unresolved questions that an approach of singularity may appear to leave unaddressed. These are identified with the following: the drifting to an ethical enterprise that applies only at the individual level; the alleged neglect of power and its relation to life and, finally the impact of an ethics of singularity on political practices (for Connolly, scaling up potentially to the global level). The final part of the enquiry will proceed by addressing these objections, that could be advanced against the ethics

elaborated here as a response to the treatment of life that was found in biopolitics and vitalism. The following and conclusive sections aim thus at re-engaging and demonstrating how the analysis just performed addresses the initial problem set out by the study.

Taking distance from a mere individualistic/aestheticising ethics

The analysis just performed in regard to the idea of micropolitics in Connolly could lead to the conclusion that such approach relies heavily on the individual and might represent a highly individualising and even aestheticising enterprise, which does not have any appeal for collective change or action[82]. As briefly mentioned, Connolly's democratic theory is built on the central notion of "identity" of the subject that enters and establishes political relationships with others and other constituencies. Connolly understands identities always as collective and relational, since they derive from the emergence and encounter with intrasubjective (as seen, at the level of the micropolitics of the self) and intersubjective (at the social and cultural level) differences and, eventually, forms of life. Also in the last development of his theory, moreover, he seems to increasingly think in terms of assemblages of beings and entities, which immediately points to a dimension that is necessarily plural (Connolly, 2010; 2013).

There is therefore a cut with, and even a rejection of, those positions which had strictly derived the ethical nature of the subject either from any transcendent position of an ethical human nature (like in Kantian or Augustinian perspectives, both implying, even if differently, an understanding of the subject as "homo duplex", partaking simultaneously to an empirical/physical condition - judged negatively - and a spiritual/transcendent one - deemed to capture the very essence of *human* beings, see Connolly, 2002b).

On the contrary, Connolly's source of ethics is drawn from an attitude of care for life and the earth that is located in a completely immanent dimension (White, 2010). It derives from the sense of fascination and gratitude towards the "fugitive abundance" of life that puts in a position of constant openness and wonder. The very source of an ethical attitude remains therefore internal to the subject, and strictly

[82] See for instance the debate generated after Foucault's notion of "aesthetics of the self" as in Seppa (2004); Peters (2005); Milchman and Rosenberg (2007); Iftode (2013). Smith (2015); but also more specifically in relation to Connolly, Ferguson (2007); Leet (2004).

connected to the interactions of its multiple registers of being. Connolly, therefore, does not discard the notions of relationality and collectivity, equally central in the formation of such ethics:

> One is implicated ethically with others, first, through sharing an identity with some of them, second, through the stirring of unpursued possibilities in oneself that exceeds one's identity, and third, through the engagement with pressures to resent obdurate features of the human condition (Connolly, 1999:166).

It should also be noticed that Connolly does not rule out the possibility of experiencing also conflict and agonism in relationships with others. Again quoting from him just after, he specifies that it is "an ethics in which adversaries are respected and maintained in a mode of agonistic mutuality, an ethic in which alter-identities foster agonistic respect for the difference that constitute them, an ethic of care for life" (Connolly, 1999:166). Care for life is here taken as a necessary disposition to appreciate the productive element present in life, in order to open up and pluralise the ways of interacting with it. As primary implication of this approach, thus, his ethics helps make a jump outside the limiting logics of inclusions and exclusions in which the biopolitical qualification of life was still seen to operate and, by so doing, prodicing a sharp distinction between qualified modes of life and life excluded from the socio-political order. The ethics offered by Connolly cuts across the process of normalisation operating such distinctions and pluralises the modes of life that can cross the threshold of existence and find expression in the socio-political world[83].

Nevertheless, this does not mean that such an account of ethics is taken as a universal and uniform value already given or owned by individuals (as either any transcendent source or transcendental assumption might imply). It rather relies on every candidate's singular participating to the relations that give it its meaning. The notion of singularity that has been introduced and used in the analysis so far thus seems to support also Connolly's idea of a non-individualistic (but also non-universal) relational ethics. It is grounded on an idea of singularity as the qualification of subjects that continuously take part in the interplay of multiple identities and differences. "Singularity" provides an adequate analytical tool to bridge the individual ethical

[83] Moreover, it is also possible to observe how this call for a pluralisation towards other modes of being (and other identities) can be easily expanded also to the nonhuman world, embracing possibly all forms of life, through the call for an equal "ethics of care" for life and the world. "Singularity" appears therefore as the suitable term to express and capture an ethics of care for life which does not discriminate *a priori* on what counts as life and how the latter can be engaged.

mode of being with the multiplicity of identities and beings encountered in the social sphere.

The outcome of an ethics of singularity is to generate an action at the level of multiplicities. In fact, Connolly's view is very much the continuation and practice of micropolitics in an "action in concert" or in the creative formation of "assemblages" of multilayered and spread action (Connolly, 1995: xx; something that I will touch on further in the coming sections). Far for producing an individualistic drift and outcome, the focus on the individual self is only the starting point to develop those attitudes that can be then used and scaled up first in the engagement with other modes of life at levels below institutions and the state, and then, ultimately, that can also impact on the institutional and state dimension of politics.

In this regard, Connolly's attempt, which I here follow, is far from reaching the point of a hyper-individualisation, which closes down possibilities of engagement with other modes of being. Almost the opposite, I argue that the association of the idea of singularity to a form of ethical attitude precisely excludes this risk, since it already implies the repositioning and putting into question of one's own modes of identity and norms in relation to the experience and the encounter with the other (regardless of whether this alterity consists in other human beings or a broader range of forms of life)[84].

I would go as far as to suggest that, in fact, such an ethical approach and its expansion into an ethics of singularity can be read as a process of de-subjectification. It always entails the engagement with and recognition of other forms of life as its main objective and purpose. It is not the affirmation of one's own existence (as an exasperation of a capillary and hyper-individualistic assertion of one's identity), but a much more complex relational process of seeing oneself as both subject to but also at the same time contributing to defining norms or standard of qualification of types of life. Singularity as ethical approach helps maintain the possibility for disposition and action while disjoining it from any fixed, finite or strong understanding of identity and being. For this reason, the outcome of this approach cannot be equated to any individualistic enterprise.

[84] In my argument, ethics of singularity aims precisely at a de-individualisation and decentering of the self in entering into relations. This departs from both universalising systems of ethics or morality and from ethical systems that express a commitment to alterity as their point of departure, but still formulate it in terms of an absolute transcendence (the kind of ethics developed after Levinas and Derrida are particularly significant here, see Levinas, 1979, 1985; Derrida, 2000, 2002; but also in Tonder and Thomassen, 2005).

Ethics and the relation with power

A further clarification of the analysis just run requires looking more closely to the concept of power and how this argument can be resolved. The literature on biopolitics highlighted how life is defined as a product of power dynamics that contribute to subjective formation. In this, through Foucault, I have suggested that power is changeable and fluid. Foucault's analysis of resistance has demonstrated the possibility of opening up spaces, gaps and fissures left open by both the idea of power understood as positional sovereignty and the way in which power is factually enacted and implemented by means of biopolitical dispositifs.

Yet, it could be argued that the element of power in the approaches analysed in Chapter 4 appears downplayed and fundamentally neglected, or at the best dissolved in the broader system of relations[85]. I have already tried to suggest that the idea of power is not absent in Spinozist theories, but rather subsumed to the broader categories of a system of naturalism. By focusing on life as a maximisation of one's intensities, the attention is put on the relationality, without the need to specify what the sign of these relations is or to determine their source. Spinozist thought, thus, goes beyond the concern of biopolitics, that puts the accent on power as the key discursive element structuring the field of experience. It is now possible to resolve this apparent gap and use Connolly to demonstrate how the trajectory of an engagement with life through ethics elaborated so far in fact addresses the problem of power by simultaneously incorporating a richer and more plural account of life reached in the previous steps of the analysis.

This point appears relevant for the problematic engaged by the thesis. The question that the starting debate on biopolitics set up was precisely how to respond and counter the exclusions and totalising qualifications of forms of life that biopolitical regimes impose by systems of normalisations, and, ultimately, how to rethink the engagement with modes of life in a way that does not replicate these types of exclusions. Connolly's account of an ethics of engagement and the ensuing forms of micropolitics can help provide an answer to the shortcomings pointed out by the criticisms aforementioned. By power, I mean the various forms of domination that usher in processes of normalisation of life forms, as what is reduced to the object of a

[85] The latter may seem to downplay the manipulating, hindering and often negative effects that forms of power exercise. This might seem to dismiss concrete forms of struggle against power dynamics and the exclusions that they produce (Coole, 2013; Cudworth and Hobden, 2010).

power *over* life. These can be visible in various modes of domination by the sovereign authority as well as their continuation and enactment in biopolitical mechanisms operating and ordering life in the social sphere.

First, my argument does not ignore the effect that power logics play in the shaping of identities and forms of life. Ways of being are never given *a priori* or as emerging from a historical vacuum, but are always located and situated in the structures of power that give them origin and create their conditions of possibility. Continuing with the premises laid down by Foucault, he makes the point of how ways of life inscribed and made possible within a certain truth-regime imply the infusion of norms, judgments and standards into the affective life of those subject to them.

In this, the biological dimension (the one that is more directly made object of manipulation and control) is never entirely separable from the cultural elements underpinning ways of life, inasmuch as it is possible to speak about "bioculture" (also in Ingold and Palsson, 2013). Connolly states that every way of life is already biocultural and biopolitical (Connolly, 2005: 139), whereby the biological dimension of life does not correspond to the genetic only, but attends the influences that culture has also on the layers of corporeality. The latter point can be read in line with a unification of the discursive and the material/corporeal dimension of existence. The account of "biocultural" or "biosocial" beings approximates the idea of a milieu in which social and natural elements are profoundly intertwined and ultimately indistinguishable from one another. Simultaneously, it appears clear that, yet, such an account does not neglect the effects that the discursive structuring of biopolitical logics has on life and that vitalist theories seemed to leave aside from their questions and concerns.

Moreover, I have intimated that the renegotiation of political relations starts before (not in temporal but in logical terms), and expands beyond, the mere definition of (legitimate, proper) forms of life by the logics of sovereign and biopolitical power, as the only forces structuring the field of life. The thesis has supported the possibility of embracing a more fluid idea of power and acknowledging the continuous interactions and dynamics of power *of* life, which needs to be assumed as always abundant and excessive to the (bio)political attempts to dominate and normalise it. Not reducing the diagnosis of power either on one or the other polarity of biopolitics and vitalism traced in the schematic in Part I is seen as a productive solution to remain not only more open and responsive to the types of life that can enter the political domain,

but also more appreciative of the specificity and contingencies of the struggles that pertain to modes of life and define their emergence.

The type of ethics of singularity mediates and interacts in more complex ways with both the logics of sovereign and biopolitical power than what biopolitical readings would maintain. However, it also simultaneously corrects the shortcomings of the theories of vitalism analysed in Chapter 2, which ended up reproducing a qualification and categorisation of modes of living, even though apparently giving priority to the side of natural life. An ethics of singularity is more similar to a disposition pertaining to a "plurality of forces circulating through and under the positional sovereignty of the official arbitrating body" (Connolly, 2005: 145). It engages with modes of life in their situatedness and specificity, before and beyond qualifications imposed on it. I argue that this alternative approach does allow room for recognising the capacity of life to oppose and always escape systems of normalisation and affirm its own norms and ways of existence.

In this way, the relation between power and life is not reduced to a binary and unidirectional logic whereby power imposes a system of domination on life (as it happens in biopolitics), nor escape and neglects the engagement with the question of power altogether (a critique that could be opposed to vitalisms). Rather, it carves a space to enter new elements into the system and acknowledge room for ways of life to participate actively into the formation and possibility of power itself. This lays at the core of an attempt to rethink the way in which the current debate around the politics of life defines and qualifies modes of living, and approach it in a more plural and potentially open fashion.

The latter aspect plays a crucial implication for the argument that I elaborate. The conceptualisation and definition of forces participating into political mechanism do not address the action of the role of power and the sovereign authority only. Rather, they describe a power that irrupts into established (discursive/cultural) regimes more broadly and disrupts existent systems of normalisation which very often produce and perpetrate exclusions in the forms of life that are allowed to exist. By disrupting the dominant order and inserting new energies and expressions into a given milieu, they resemble the challenges and transformations related to the practice of a Spinozian ethics as an action situated and taking place in the broader context of an ecosystem (a milieu) of ideas. In this case, ideas identify both the dominant logics and normalising

discourses that structure the biopolitical terrain, but also those emergent ideas and forces that have the power and energy to disrupt established order.

Moreover, this insertion of the complexity of cultural elements into power and political logics can also take place in conflictual and ultimately agonistic terms. Precisely because the sign of the encounters is not defined, they can entail also moments of disruption or potential conflict. These are resolved by an attempt to overcome this opposition and maximise one's power of action in each encounter or relation established. This is deemed fundamental to respond and address some of the limitations to which the idea of an emergent power of life could be attached, and accomplish a rethinking of the norms and ethics of life that takes into account the complex processes through which life and power interact in multiple directions and in a contingent and situated engagement.

The impact on global politics

After expanding further on the relational character of the ethics here suggested and discussing the problem of power, one final challenge or objection could be advanced with regard to the relevance of the approach here elaborated for formal and institutional politics. Having maintained that the practice of ethics is situated primarily at the level of micro-conducts, gestures and dispositions in everyday life (see also Beausoleil above, 2017), it could be argued that yet, this framework does not seem to bear particular significance for the exercise of macro-level politics.

The present and last section aims at addressing this criticism, and demonstrate that, in fact, it is possible to scale up possibilities of action not only to the level of one's immediate relations, but also to the macro-level of the formal institutional sphere. This entails understanding the possibilities of action and engagement with life in more multilayered and diverse terms. In this regard, the engagement with formal and governmental decisions occurring in the institutional sphere are not neglected, but rather reinscribed in a broader system of relations. I will again use Connolly's work to address this final point. To put it in the author's words: the pluarlisation of pluralism (in fact, the key concern underpinning his work) does not aim at depreciating a politics of governance through state apparatuses; "rather, it nudges the latter into critical relations with other dimensions of politics" (Connolly, 1995: xix). This latter argument, thus, helps advance the claim that the idea of politics operating at the levels of relation and everyday interactions and practices does not exclude or reject the

consideration of politics at the wider state- or institutional scale. By looking at the macro-institutional dimension, moreover, this stage of the analysis substantiates the argument explored in the previous chapter in regard to Spinozist theories and the material power expressed in an ecosystem of ideas.

The ethico-political account of *micro*-politics offered by the previous discussion aims at making an impact on state and governmental politics. The synthesis and connection of these multiple levels where political action can be performed accomplishes a twofold aim. To quote Connolly: "first, a more genuine appreciation of the fugitive abundance of being; second, revealing and construing the territorial state as one among many sites of political action and identification in late-modern time" (Connolly, 1995: xxiii). The focus on the micro-dimension, therefore, does not neglect the effects played on macro-political structures. As mentioned in the opening section of the chapter, in the definition of ethics as a tool for practicing forms of resistance, the very meaning of politics is opened up and identified with the level of the everyday gestures and practices that pertain to subjects in power apparatuses (Beausoleil, 2017: 314). Ultimately, this multiplication of the sites of politics can be read as an attempt to accomplish a further pluralisation: along with a horizontal one that aims at a more genuine account of life and ways of being at the level of the self and one's range of immediate relations, there seems to occur also a "vertical" pluralisation of the sites and locuses of political action, which problematises the role of the state as the final site for acts of political mobilisation and identification.

Such an account has therefore two important implications for the argument. First, it further corroborates and supports the claim made in the previous section regarding the engagement with the question of power. Secondly, and agreeing with Connolly, it redefines political activity as a form of militant activism, which starts from the modification of everyday practices: forms of cultivation of attitudes that dislodge and unsettle attachments to sedimented ideas, practices and ways of life; but that can also be scaled up and carry a transformative potential at broader macro-scale or even global dynamics.

The points just made can be read through Connolly's theory across its multiple stages, and become particularly evident when the author engages with the global or macro-scale patterns of political intervention and action in his latest works (Connolly, 2010; 2013, 2017). At this further stage, he starts looking at the global dimension of problems and dynamics, and at how these are related to an active (and transformative)

individual and collective political practice. The core of his argument is that the introduction of changes into one's own behaviour can eventually scale up into political changes at the wider level.

A fruitful concept to visually portray the sense of global interconnectedness of multiple processes is the idea of a "global resonance machine" (Connolly, 2010:135). The image of a resonance machine well depicts the processes by which the situated action in one part of the world can reverberate and be scaled up to other parts, and being amplified across all global dynamics. Although such links may appear imperceptible, in fact, they already place actions into a multiple chain of related influences and effects. In the author's words:

> The elements into such mobile machine impinge upon one another to some degree, infiltrate each other to an extent, and also exceed both relationships in generating loose energies that might be colonised in new ways (Connolly, 2010: 135).

If the idea of the machine can make sense of the generativity and emergent processes in a global scale, however, it is necessary also to be cautious against the uncertainty produced by the multiple forces that can be involved in it. In Connolly's words:

> Once a machine gets its role, it is abstract because of its self-amplifying character, because its dynamism exceeds the control of humans entangled in it, and because it is susceptible to changes through the interplay between new infusions from outside and responses by extant elements. An abstract machine in which human estate figures prominently is irreducible to machines entirely outside the human estate. The former introduce complex relations of agency, alliance and so on somewhat less discernible in the latter. Nevertheless it might be useful to see that abstract machines are formed in the nonhuman estate, the human estate, and, particularly, human-nonhuman relational processes (Connolly, 2010: 136).

The last passage reveals the expansion of the uncertainty and, simultaneously, potentiality to new creation and activity that characterise interactions among entities in a complex world. As far as a politics of the self is concerned, in this enlarged cosmological account, ethics is no longer directed towards the human "other" only, but opened to all entities that play some degree of agentic force. In this multilayered system of forces, it appears therefore clear how the state and institutional practices remain only one among the factors that can shape and influence political outcomes.

Moreover, the role-experimentation at the micro-scale can lead to equivalent experimentations at the large-scale of actors that are distributed along structures of hierarchies and power (being them collectivites, groups, associations, institutions…). Changes at the micro-level can enhance participation and involvement into more robust movements or initiatives of actions, that ultimately may result in the rupture or destabilisation of a given order – and therefore in possibilities for change. As the author expresses his invitation to enact a constant democratic *militant* practice:

> One way to get a preliminary handle on a difficult situation may be to launch experimental shifts in the roles we now play, both because such an accumulation of shifts can be good in itself and more because such constituency actions may, first, seed the way for more militant, collective actions outside electoral politics and, eventually, fold these issues into electoral politics (Connolly, 2013: 411).

The interconnectedness among different levels of political agency is put as condition for change. Even when speaking of transformative endeavours and destabilising political behaviours and processes, therefore, the role of existent political institutions is not neglected. Rather, such an account can incorporate the effect on institutional political practices. The dispositional ethics characterised above and here articulated in terms of an engagement with life as singularity, thus, proves to supplement and not replace or be entirely opposite to electoral and formal political practices.

Finally, the reasons under Connolly's commitment to a multi-layered form of global action are made clear in his very last works that notably associate "the fragility of things" with "neoliberal fantasies" (2013). His effort to formulate a theory of politics that embraces non-human life worlds and multiple registers of being seems to be ultimately derived by the extent to which these forces are produced as effects of neoliberal practices at the global scale. The development of new ways of coping with the unpredictability and constant threat of natural processes and phenomena appears to emerge as responsive (and even "resistant", see Kahn, 2009) behaviour against risks created by a global neoliberal dominant logic. In a close passage: "The thesis is that today we must escalate creative action on several fronts as we also slow down and divert the intersections between neoliberal capitalism and a variety of nonhuman force-fields" (Connolly, 2013:411). This is in line with the argument (Kahn, 2009) that Connolly's theory provides the formulation of a disposition that helps transform and revolutionarise one's everyday way of life and introduce new practices that disrupt

logics operating at the capillary levels of existence. The passage through Sharp's system of ideas that are generated by affective states and dispositions and translated into new ways of thinking and practices that have a material impact on the configuration of the world helps theorise this further opening and formulate the possibility for this ethics to have an impact at the political level.

Connolly's argument appears thus effective to address the question of how to engage with life beyond the normalising operation effected by structures of power and undertake an action that can have effects also at the institutional level. The concern addressed by the thesis is the application of ethics as a first dimension where to challenge established treatment of forms of life – and attend them in a more open sense.

As mentioned, my analysis remains fundamentally different from that of Connolly, whose starting concern is the negotiation of relations of identity and difference in democratic practice. Nevertheless, the characterisations just mentioned underline the relevance of Connolly's theory for supporting the formulation of a response to current perspectives on the politics of life and their engagement with modes of living. This relevance derives from the fact that the form of sensibility or ethos that he suggests helps carve out a space for an element of life that responds to biopolitical logics and norms and that remains excluded by the framework of biopolitics. Moreover, his account builds on and supports the explanation formulated by drawing from Spinozist thought and demonstrates how the affective experience can enhance transformation of the surrounding environment in the medium of an ecosystem of ideas and the possibilities of actions ensuing from it.

In conclusion, as mentioned, the ethics of singularity here suggested seems to cut across those sharp divisions between person and non-person; cultural and natural; human and animal that were seen ushering from biopolitical normalising regimes and that neglect room for alternative and more plural ways of life within their systems. At the same time, it also does not start from the assumption of an *a priori* liveliness of life as an absolute term, which also reproduces classifications and divisions, as seen in vitalism. It has also been demonstrated that the ethics here outlined does not pertain to the individual sphere only, but can – and needs - to play an influence at the level of institutional complexes from the local, national to the global. In other words, it creates a chain where the effects at the micro- and affective level can move up to induce changes at the wider dimension and vice versa, in a relation of reciprocal independence. In the political context, it appears therefore even clearer why the

insistence of the micropolitics of the self that was seen starting with Foucault and now completed in Connolly via contemporary forms of Spinozism plays an important role in starting action that can challenge established ways of envisioning the politics of life. This is enabled by a turn to an account of life as "singularity", that problematises the idea of the self in its own condition of relationality and situatedness, and ultimately opens it up to a more generous appreciation of alternative modes of being.

The author's approach to ethics therefore helps sustain the account of an ethics of singularity suggested by the thesis. Singularity seems here to build the bridge between an understanding of life as object of a power over (constructed by biopolitical regimes) and a force of power of (advocated by vitalist accounts). It invites a consideration of life in relation to politics as more plural and nuanced. The latter account attempts thus an alternative route to the mapping out of current positions of a politics of life outlined in the schematic provided in Part I of the thesis. In the analysis above, an ethics of singularity seems able to support the openness and continuous transformation that pertains to one's own identity and enables to engage in constantly new relationships with others and open up new possibilities to act ethically and politically, beyond established relations of power of/over life. Through these dynamics of remaining open to the rethinking of norms of existence in a more receptive sense (by challenging the existent and externally imposed ones), Connolly's theory has helped provide the closest and most relevant support in fulfilling the question of rethinking the norm and ethics of life, and challenging the often restrictive and exclusionary outcomes that the mapping of the politics of life provided in Part I seemed not to be fully able to address.

A very final point could be addressed in regard to the overall framework that has been suggested here. This relates to reflections around the possibility of critique, that has been partially touched on as a second, parallel sub-layer of the analysis already in Chapters 3 and 4. It could be argued that, yet, the approach proposed, especially in the latest conclusions explored through Connolly, appears itself a way to comply – and thus reinforce – rather than fundamentally challenge existent structures of power and normalising ways of acting and thinking. Hence, the kinds of action and conduct that this approach leads to could themselves be seen as a result of an uncritical normalisation and compliance with the language of power. I have tried to demonstrate why, in my argument, this is not the case, and how the ethical attitude outlined in the study can productively interact with – and against – power logics and ultimately fosters

avenues for change. However, I believe this point can be addressed also at another level of analysis, by looking at the implications entailed by the use of a framework of ontopolitics. I argue that, in order to remain open and sensitive to the concrete and contingent struggles of life that can present themselves to "us" (as researchers and living beings), action and comprehension can start *in the middle*, from the perspective in which one is already situated. To put it in the words of Coleman and Rosenow:

> An embodied and ontopolitically committed self is always already in the middle of the double move of analysis and projectional theoretical construction, or theoretically-informed engagement and critique of those very practices […] 'Where/how to start' becomes a superfluous question (Coleman and Rosenow 2017: 268).

I maintain that, if one wants to remain more open and receptive to the struggles and problems that start from the practical engagement with life, then a start "in the middle" is not only necessary, but also productive – lest falling prey to an inability to act at all. This is why, at the beginning of the chapter, it was argued that the type of action (supported by an ethics) advocated here cannot replace – but also does not exclude – critique. Moreover, this also explains why, in the last stage of the analysis, the response to the problem posed has ultimately been presented as a "practice": we are already engaged with life and thus action takes place in the middle, neither before nor against, but *along with* any attempt to theory-construction – as well as with other forms of critique.

Conclusion

The chapter addressed the possible challenges that still remained open from the previous elaboration of an ethics of singularity suggested by the thesis. In particular, it tried to anticipate and, eventually, respond to, the criticisms that could be advanced against an account of ethics thus understood. These have been identified with the following. First, the apparent collapse into a highly individualistic and isolating enterprise that does not take into account the dimension of the collectivity. Secondly, the overlooking of the question of power, which was in fact central in the debate set out through biopolitical theories at the beginning of the thesis and that vitalist approaches seem to disregard. Third, and connected to the latter point, the effects that

the endorsement of such an ethics can have in regard to formal and macro-structures of political processes and phenomena.

In order to formulate these potential limitations, I first engaged with the broader debate around an idea of "dispositional ethics", as an approach to ethics gaining attention in the field of political studies. In this regard, I argued that an ethics of singularity itself can be included in this broader category. The enquiry performed seems therefore relevant for ongoing debates in the discipline. Then, I tried to address the questions emerging from this broader account by looking at the work of William Connolly. By following the way in which Connolly integrates his ethics of cultivation and critical engagement to inform a democratic and, in his latest works, a planetary, politics, I argued that it is possible to incorporate the ethics outlined above into political practices. In this analysis, it has been necessary also to specify what is meant here by politics, that is, looking at the set of relationships in which one enters in its closest proximity and in the capillaries of the everyday, through practices and gestures, by challenging established ways of thinking that hinder the expression of life. This also justifies the emphasis on politics as a practice highlighted in this section. It also specified the complementary and non-substitutive role that this mode of practicing politics maintains with standard forms of critique, thus linking back the discussion to the engagement with critique as seen in Foucault and then expanded in Spinozist thought.

Then, the analysis of Connolly as an author that fundamentally links ethics to politics helped demonstrate how such an account of the politics of life here intimated remains relevant for discussing matters of power and to have a potential purchase in informing practices at a macro- and wider scale of formal politics. The aim was to suggest a mode of engagement with forms of life that provides an alternative answer to the normalising and often exclusionary measures of processes of qualification of life that are enforced and reproduced by biopolitical power, which was the question posed at the beginning of the thesis. I finally justified why the emphasis on an understanding of ethics and action as a practice at this point relates to the enquiry conducted from the approach of ontopolitics, which was the method of engagement with the debates that opened up the discussion in Part I of the thesis.

Conclusion

The Relevance of "Life"

The analysis of Connolly's work in Chapter 5 allowed me to address some of the impasses that remained open in the solution offered by the previous stages of the analysis, namely, the apparent neglect of the question of power and the alleged detachment from macro-scale institutional politics. Although contestable, the latter move has been deemed relevant for two main purposes. First, it demonstrates that the account of ethics suggested by the thesis does not stand as an alternative, but can be complementary to existent structures and practices of politics. The perspective elaborated therefore, does not claim any superiority or supreme validity over competitive perspectives. Rather, in line with the enquiry conducted and with what mentioned in light of the approach of ontopolitics presented at the beginning, it poses itself as one possible option which is not exclusionary of other possibilities, but remains open and contestable to new formulations and adjustments. Secondly, the final step in Chapter 5 wanted to demonstrate that the perspective provided is not completely detached or separate from latest developments in political theory. The engagement with Beausoleil's idea of dispositional ethics fulfilled precisely this aim: demonstrating that similar sensitivities and an orientation towards modes of envisioning ethics and possibilities of action below the level of formal structures of politics are present in contemporary scholarship in the field. Once again, this does not mean implying that the focus of political action has fundamentally shifted, but that multiple lines of development, influences and directionalities can be included when we try to define what politics consist of. The engagement with the politics of life that the analysis set out to discuss already made a contribution in enlarging the field and the concern of politics to the micro-level of the attention for forms of life.

In light of these considerations, it is now possible to conclude by summarising the rationale and objective of the analysis and the contribution that it aimed to achieve.

Project rationale and argument

The research just performed addressed the question of the understandings of life in the main approaches that engage with the question of the politics of life in contemporary political and social theorising. The underpinning concern that led the

enquiry has been an aspiration to ask whether, and in what way, existent perspectives are able to make sense of the ways in which life is continuously problematised in the multiple forms of interactions and discourses that define what counts as life, what its value is and what the implications of this assessment for everyday living and for politics.

The research identified two main approaches that are seen as fruitful to address the question: biopolitics and vitalism, which stand as two preeminent perspectives informing contemporary political theorising. I argued that the two approaches provide the opposite ends of the axis along which current perspectives of a politics of life can be structured. In Chapter 1, I started with the discussion of the literature on biopolitics and showed that it significantly exposes the problem of how modes of life become qualified as effect of regimes of power that construct the meaning and value ascribed to modes of living. I used the idea of a norm of life to capture all biopolitical apparatuses through which forms of life become classified. More specifically, the thesis has selected the literature that demonstrates how biopolitics functions through the attribution of value to types of life, by rehabilitating the ancient Greek classification of the organised life of *bios* as opposed to the natural and biological life of *zoe*. Rearticulating this definition, the authors selected in Chapter 1 reached a formulation of biopolitics as a process of classification of life forms, that operates by means of logics of inclusion and exclusions between forms of life considered legitimate, or proper, and thus assigned political significance, and those that instead remain excluded from the political realm. Many of the categories that define types of life, like human/animal, person/thing, healthy/ill are read as biopolitical apparatuses that establish the value attributed to life and inform the politics governing living beings. The authors selected to develop this first stage of analysis were the following: Hannah Arendt, with her analysis of the rise of the social sphere and her assessment of the situation of refugees; Giorgio Agamben and his biopolitical account of sovereignty and bare life; Nikolas Rose and Paul Rabinow, concerned with the normalisation and classification of modes of life as effect of medical practices, and Roberto Esposito, which instead takes issue with the juridico-political notion of personhood at the centre of the politics of modernity and of the processes of immunisation through which the latter operates. Overall, these perspectives have highlighted the reduced, constrained, often annihilated character of the idea of life subjected to biopolitical control. The latter functions through mechanism of inclusions

and exclusions that decide about the legitimate forms of life that can enter into the political domain.

Opposite to this first perspective, Chapter 2 turned the attention to approaches of vitalism, which are deemed to sit at the opposite end of the axis mapping out perspectives on the politics of life. By advocating an account of life as generative, productive and lively, vitalism may appear to respond and offer an alternative to the qualifying and often repressive outcomes seen in place in biopolitics. I outlined a "vitalist turn" in the social sciences, its main claims around the idea of life and how these assumptions are articulated in some perspectives that can be gathered under this label. However, at this first stage, the analysis maintained that, even though formulating an apparently opposite account, perspectives of vitalism are not able to free themselves completely from distinctions operating in biopolitics, that means, they seem to reproduce analogous, but opposite, processes of qualification that give priority to certain types of life and downplay the value and the space of others. By so doing, they are ultimately unable to reframe the terms of the discourse around which the politics of life can be read and to provide an account that fundamentally challenges the premises of biopolitics. A first contribution of this project is thus that of providing a comprehensive perspective of the debate on the politics of life and suggesting a framework to read through this area, in response to the more blurred and sometimes unclear way in which the secondary literature examined in the introduction tends to deal with the subject.

As the underlying method to the schematic suggested in Part I of the thesis, I maintained that the debate between the two positions can be best captured by Connolly's idea of ontopolitics, which I here used as a content as well as a method for leading the enquiry. The discussion of these perspectives highlighted the link that exists between ontological assumptions of certain positions and the kind of politics that is derived by them. In other words, their strong ontological stances (that means, in the debate here outlined, either an idea of life as discursively constructed by the power exercised over it or an ontological and material affirmation of life as principle) impact on the type of questions, struggles and entities that can become object of consideration. The deconstruction and analysis of the ontological premises of the positions analysed has led to demonstrate how biopolitics and vitalism remain fundamentally incapable of either conceptualising or detecting phenomena and experiences concerning an engagement with life that escapes the classificatory terms

that they establish, and instead takes place at the contingent and situated level of relations.

After providing this analysis and criticism in Part I, the second part of the thesis moved on to attempt an alternative trajectory to investigate a politics of life more open to modes of living and to the contingent responses to the engagement with life. Part II attempted a consideration of life beyond the exclusionary and qualifying outcomes analysed in the previous part. To this aim, I argued that returning to the original perspective of Michel Foucault can provide a useful point of departure for an alternative line of enquiry. Foucault, in fact, has a more complex and nuanced engagement with life in his *oeuvre*, which does not reduce life either to the object of a power exercised over it, nor to a pure force of life that expresses itself beyond any discursive and power constraints. This ambivalent and complex perspective appears particularly evident in the formulation of his concepts of resistance and critique, that he poses as co-extensive with power. Significantly, the locus of these sites of resistance to the discursive power of biopolitics is grounded on the material dimension of affective experience and the body, a dimension that thus partially escapes power logics which operate through the norm. Moreover, he fundamentally links the practice of critique and freedom to the dimension of ethics that has the body and the affective dimension at its centre. The element of resistance via ethics, in Foucault, enables the entering into the system of a form of action that opposes and counters the normalising logics of power. I suggested that this is expression of a force of life that proves irreducible to the sole subjection to power dynamics. Moreover, I moved from Foucault to George Canguilhem to further characterise this impulse of life as the expression of life struggle of survival and capacity to generate and perform its own norms.

The latter aspect has been important to build a bridge with the naturalistic theory of norms and life derived from the contemporary Spinozian turn in politics and philosophy. In Chapter 4, I outlined Spinoza's account of ethics as emerging particularly from the reading of Deleuze and other contemporary authors. More specifically, I highlighted how this literature conceives of possibilities of action and freedom starting from the affective dimension of experience. The discussion of Spinozian theories helps build on the relationality and responsiveness to relations that was introduced in Foucault, and that, with this further step, becomes extended to the material relations constituting one's environment. Crucially, Spinoza's monistic

ontology (well captured by Deleuze's notion of univocity), which establishes a continuity between the affective experience of the body and thought, supports a materialist theory of ideas whereby a modification of the affective experience can generate new ideas able to modify one's surrounding environment. This latter aspect enlarges and extends to a natural account the idea of norm central in Foucault. In Part II, the analysis elaborated an ethical account built on the idea of singularity as capturing the uniqueness and relationality of modes of engagement with life, which occurs not through pre-established categories and norms of life, but at the level of the contingent and situated encounter. The idea of singularity thus seems to remain more open and comprehensive in the engagement with forms of life than the outcomes reached by the debate in Part I. An ethics of singularity has been suggested as a framework that is able to accommodate an alternative mode of engagement with life beyond the discourse of qualifications examined in the first debates suggested. In order to demonstrate how an ethics of singularity can work in practice and as alternative framework of analysis, I briefly discussed the case of refugees as a possible context of application. In this regard, I first showed how both approaches of biopolitics and vitalism remain bound to rigid classifications and binary logics in offering an analysis and diagnosis of the issue. Moreover, again by adopting an ontopolitical interpretation, I argued that they are unable to recognise and conceptualise alternative modes of engagement with life, and thus remain limited in their critical and analytical purchase. I thus demonstrated how the idea of singularity can work in practice.

In order to move a step further and to anticipate some possible criticism that could be moved against the argument here supported and its application to the example proposed, in the third and final part of the thesis, I interrogated the relevance of the ethics of singularity for the contemporary practice of politics. The analysis argued that the ethics outlined above can inspire a political practice that infuses a disposition of openness to forms of existence at the level of micro- and everyday relationships that build the texture of society. By looking at William Connolly's idea of cultivation and responsiveness, I argued that the sensitivity to the emergence of new modes of living can generate new initiatives of ideas and, eventually, actions, which can be potentially scaled up to influence also the practice in institutional and formal sites of politics. This can support avenues for a politics that is more receptive to (and can better account for) the emergence of new modes of life and living beyond the exclusionary outcomes that the politics of life analysed in Part I produced.

Contribution and aims: towards an open politics of life

In light of the argument and the overview of contents just outlined, it is thus possible to conclude by reinstating and summarising the contribution of the project, the place of the research here conducted with regard to the existent literature, and the implications it has for contemporary practices.

First, I maintain that the research here conducted contributes to the understanding of approaches of the politics of life in contemporary political philosophy and theory. While the perspectives of either biopolitics and vitalism have themselves a very long history and tradition, and my analysis has been more a critical engagement with the two than a genuine addition to either of those fields separately, the attempt to find a synthesis that brings them together in a unique reading seems underexplored. This appear evident by the analysis of the survey of the critical and secondary literature around the two perspectives discussed in the Introduction. Several authors and strands tend to read these approaches as separate and opposite, but none has so far attempted to highlight how, in their being opposite, the two perspectives also make an analogous and symmetric move in grounding an understanding of politics in their (strong) ontological assumptions around a certain idea of life. This starting point precludes them the possibility of criticising the alternative perspective in a way that fundamentally challenges the terms of the debate. This contradiction was highlighted in particular by a critical use of the notion of ontopolitics here applied as a method of analysis. Ontopolitics demonstrated how the polarisation and binary way in which these perspectives are defined and stand in opposition to one another, leaves no room for divergency by alternative interpretations, so much so that, as soon as the premises of one account are rejected, one is immediately drawn "like a magnet" towards the opposite polarity. This configuration of the dominant positions on the politics of life, however, closes down possibilities to reframing the terms of the discourse, and thus looking for or even leaving room for alternatives. A first contribution of the project is thus offering a comprehensive mapping of the problematic of life (and of how this is accounted for) in contemporary political theorising. This discussion has been undertaken in Part I of the analysis. Even beyond this, the analysis has demonstrated that the problem of life in contemporary theory goes beyond the way in which it is internally captured by either of the perspectives considered separately (which take like as object of a power over in the case of

biopolitics and as capable of its own power in vitalism). Rather, it demonstrated that the problem lies in the fact that existent perspectives remain incapable of conceiving of life in relation to politics beyond these boundaries. They remain too prescriptive as to what should count as life, and therefore they are unable to capture the manifestations of life that escape or do not adhere to their schemes of understanding. The structuring of the debate around the politics of life offered by the thesis has therefore the function of highlighting these gap and closure that remain recognisable in the existent scholarship around the subject.

The response to these gaps led the way to the further step of the thesis, that is, the attempt to itself formulate an understanding of the relationship between politics and life that does not remain prey of the closure and reductionism ascribed to the previous perspectives. It could be argued that, by so doing, the argument of the thesis itself falls into the trap of ascribing a particular meaning or prescriptive or normative idea of life, which was the criticism advanced against the perspectives analysed in Part I. However, I maintain that the alternative suggested here (by analysing a trajectory of the ideas of life and ethics that run from Foucault to contemporary Spinozism) aims precisely at capturing the way in which the engagement and making sense of forms of life remain fundamentally open and not pre-determined, if considered in the contingent and situated character in which life is encountered and experienced. The argument of the thesis, therefore, does not fail to understand that the problem around the politics of life cannot be reduced to any final understanding or rule – lest falling prey of the same criticism that it applies to its critical targets. Rather, it suggests a way to theorise and capture this openness theoretically and conceptually. This has a strength against the current structure of the debate around the politics of life, since it enables the opening up of alternative perspectives. The one suggested by the thesis does not claim any superior validity over others, but primarily shows that new interventions in the debate are indeed possible. The politics of life, that is, the debate around the mode of engagement of life and politics, remains thus undefined and undefinable. However, this should not dissuade from any attempts to capture it by theory. Rather, it is an invitation to notice that any new interpretation emerging should remain open and contestable. This is the genuine way in which any mode of engagement with life (practical or conceptual) is deemed possible.

The reflections just suggested lead me to explicate the second dimension of the contribution, that is, the implications that the thesis has for the practices of a politics

of life. In fact, it could be wondered why to ask the question around the politics of life in the first place. I maintain that this problematic has a concrete, practical dimension, that is, as stated in the Introduction, the fact that we are part of life and surrounded by life in its multiple modes and manifestations. This is not only reflected in contemporary applications in debates that vary from bioethics to bio-art, from immigration policies to discourses of human rights. We engage with modes of life in our gestures and everyday practices, and thus we are constantly renegotiating ways in which life is encountered and made sense of, before and beyond any final conceptualisation. In this light, the analysis is thus aimed at intimating the inadequacy of existent perspectives in capturing the much more situated and contingent way in which life is experienced and which, as shown in Chapter 4 with the example provided, requires theoretical analysis to develop sharper tools to accommodate the plural and complex understanding of life beyond any rigidity and fixity of assigned norms. Insofar as we remain into binary and rigid understandings, there is something about the making sense of life that will escape explanation. It is once again Connolly that seems to capture this in a most accurate way: "the initial need today (and probably in most times) is to detach identities to a greater degree from the fixed set of alternatives in which they tend to move, to excite the experience of discrepancy with established dualities of normality/anormality, rationality/irrationality, and good/evil, sovereignty/anarchy so that alternative experiences of danger and possibility might be cultivated" (Connolly, 1992: 139). If we replace the notion of identity with the idea of modes of living and their engagement, this demonstrates and advocates how any even theoretical closure ultimately prevents from attending the way in which life is concretely and practically encountered beyond dualities and fixed categories. The politics and ethics of life elaborated in Part II of the thesis, thus, has less the aim of providing itself a definitive alterative than inviting to appreciate how practical and actual modes of engagement with life are more open, various and negotiable. This is an important problematic for all times, but it applies specifically to today's world, where issues like care for the environment and natural beings, migration flows, agricultural policies, debates around asylum remain at the top of public discourse and of policy agendas.

Finally, there is a last dimension to which I would claim that the thesis aims to make a contribution. This applies once again to the level of existent philosphico-political scholarship, but also ushers from what was just suggested in regard to the

field of practices. Throughout the analysis and starting from the approach of ontopolitics outlined in the Introduction, I intimated that the strong opposition between biopolitics and vitalism consists of the fact that they respectively conceive of a purely discursive or material understanding of life. These strong ontological assumptions inform their politics and the exclusions and restrictions that have been demonstrated. In exploring an alternative account in Part II of the thesis, I foregrounded the notion of singularity as basis for the understanding of ethics and politics I elaborated. Singularity indicated first of all the grasping of forms of life in their difference and the situated relational way in which they are encountered, without yet assuming a different degree or value among beings. At the end of the analysis, however, it appears clear how the notion of singularity accomplishes another, related aim. The term helps capture the simultaneously material and discursive dimensions that partake in the encounter of life and that, as it has been argued, are not completely separable or liable of isolation. This appeared clear with the opening of Foucault and then with the materialist theory of ideas inspired by contemporary Spinozism. If we regain the ontological level that an analysis of political interpretations in light of ontopolitics presupposes, singularity captures the bundle of the material and the discursive, the distinction of which still shapes debates in contemporary philosophy and political theorising. The emphasis on the dimension of materiality and vitality of life against the linguistic turn of the last decades, as seen, was a strong claim driving the contemporary vitalist turn explored in Chapter 2. Analogously, biopolitics has for a long time made clear the discursive construction of modes of living and being as effect of power. However, the attempt to find a synthesis between these approaches remains still weak and underexplored in contemporary theory. The use of the notion of singularity outlined here can be read in this direction and provides thus an attempt in this trajectory. This can be added thus as area of contribution of the project here pursued, along with the intervention in theoretical debates around the politics of life and the implications it can have for the practical engagements with life and modes of living. In fact, such an attempt works astride the two dimensions. My keeping into account the material and the discursive dimension or, as seen in the Introduction, matter and meaning, as Fassin (2010) has put it with regard to the specific object of life, makes a contribution to this divide. I argued that these two dimensions of life do not need to be disjoined, since the material and biological status of existence often affects the exclusions, inequalities and injustices of which life is object at the social

and political level. The concept of singularity, that I used in the second part of the thesis in building an alternative account to the politics of life, aimed at taking into consideration these only apparently separate dimensions, which are highlighted in academic discussions but that also have implications for making sense of life in everyday encounters and problems.

Finally, bridging the materiality and discursivity with which life can be made sense of has implications for the research conducted here. I suggest that my own attempt to develop a theorisation around the relationship between politics and life should not be seen itself as a move that incapsulates, crystalises and constrains modes of engagement with life. Rather, the discursive and material planes go hand in hand and developments in one direction, that is, the discursive sphere of concepts, theories and ideas, can inform and influence the field of practices, thus themselves paving way to new avenues of research. Given this mutuality and co-forming, it is thus possible to return to Foucault's quote with which I began the enquiry: in the account here outlined, forming concepts is a way of living and not of killing life, it is a way to maintain and recognise life in its openness and mobility. The current research has attempted to raise reflections, ideas and understandings around alternative ways in which current perspectives of the politics of life can be conceived. If this might result in further avenues of research in order to maintain the mobility and openness with which this scholarly and practical discourse can be addressed, it would have reached the aim that the argument of the thesis suggests.

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