

THE RADICAL TRAGIC IMAGINARY: CASTORIADIS ON AESCHYLUS & SOPHOCLES

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ABSTRACT: Castoriadis' entire colossal politico-philosophical-psychoanalytical project is based around the notion of radical autonomy, which, he argues, was most closely appropriated by the ancient Greek imaginary and the newly born *dēmokratía*. This paper critically examines Castoriadis' treatment of the earliest democrats in the world—the ancient tragedians—and argues, contra Castoriadis, that it was Aeschylus, rather than Sophocles, that embodied the classical apotheosis of radical human autonomy.

KEYWORDS: Castoriadis; Aeschylus; Sophocles; Tragedy; Ancient Greece; Greek Imaginary; Democracy; Ethics; Justice.

In 'The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy', Cornelius Castoriadis opens with the following questions: "How can we orient ourselves in history and in politics? How can we judge and choose? It is from this political interest that I start—and in this spirit that I ask: In Greek democracy is there anything of political relevance for us?"¹ Castoriadis argues that "thinking and reflecting about Greece" is not the same as doing so for "any other randomly chosen culture," because, it is only in the case of Greece that "we are reflecting and thinking about the social and historical conditions of thought itself—at least, thought as we know and practice it."² Castoriadis saw Greece as being not only part of our own, that is, Western, history and tradition but as being our *origin*.

Although he recognized the difficulty in establishing "the proper distance between ourselves and 'our own past,'" and acknowledged also that "this 'common belonging' is by necessity partly illusory," Castoriadis nevertheless set out to trace the remnants of what he described as an "active, intrinsic relationship between their institutions and our own." The "intrinsic relationship" between Greece and our own society is still active today because "there is a strong genealogical connection between their

1. Cornelius Castoriadis, 'The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy', *The Castoriadis reader*, trans. David Ames Curtis, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1997b, p. 267.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

imaginary significations and ours.”³ And it is these “imaginary significations” that we must “penetrate or reappropriate” if we are to understand Greece. “Is this at all possible?”⁴ Castoriadis asks, to understand another society? It is, he answers, but only sometimes under certain conditions, and only by some people: Castoriadis is apparently one of those people. He argues that the fact that this distinct kind of understanding is possible at all, “points to some sort of ‘potential universality’ in whatever is human for humans.”⁵ The universality does not lie in human rationality, as is commonly thought, but in “creative imagination.” It is the “creative imagination” that enables one to engage in “nontrivial thinking,” which includes the special ability to understand another society, and it is the “creative imagination” that is at the root of a potentially universal human essence. The reason that it is only a *potentially* universal human essence, as opposed to just a universal human essence that all humans of all times and at all times have, is that most people never *realise* this essence: they never get to use their “radical” creative imaginations. Why? Because they are prevented in doing so by what Castoriadis calls “the cognitive closure of the institution of society.”

HETERONOMOUS SOCIETIES

The “cognitive closure” of a society consists in that society’s *inability* to recognize itself as the creator of itself—the creator of its own laws, norms, and meanings: that is, the creator of its own “social imaginary significations.” Castoriadis calls this type of society a *heteronomous* society, as opposed to the *autonomous* society. A heteronomous society, instead of being able to grasp that *all* societies, *including* itself, are self-created, believes itself, rather, to be grounded in something *other* than itself—be it in Religion, where laws and norms and meanings are believed to be given by God and through God find their legitimation; or grounded in Reason, in the belief in the “unlimited expansion of ‘rational mastery,’”⁶ or, rather ‘pseudorational pseudomastery,’ which is what Castoriadis blames for enabling the rise of capitalism, most forms of totalitarianism, and modern ecological devastation.

Heteronomous societies legitimise their system on the basis of the inherent ‘logic’ of that system. In the case of capitalism, for example, the legitimising logic can be defined as the ‘maximization of utility and the minimization of cost’. So a capitalist society, which is our very own contemporary society, imposes on its members a specific set of laws, norms, and meanings—or social imaginary significations—whose primary function is to further propagate the heteronomous logic of capitalism. It does this in order to maintain itself in the particular closed reality it has created for itself. If one were to try to solve a problem created by capitalist society—say, for example, an environmental problem—by changing or better managing the industries created by the capitalist imaginary, the attempt will most likely fail because it will essentially acknowledge this

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 270-1.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

6. Castoriadis, ‘From Ecology to Autonomy’, p. 240.

imaginary as ‘real’, thus perpetuating the problem. Playing by the established rules will not suffice—what is needed is nothing short of a revolution that creates a *new* imaginary, a *new* human reality, with *new* meanings and laws and norms.

Social imaginary significations are created by societies in order to hold them together, in order to give them a “guarantee” that all their particular meanings, laws, norms, are the right ones. In heteronomous societies these are fabricated in such a way as to make them appear to be *predetermined* by some extra-social principle or standard which already gives an answer to any question that might be posed, and which thus destroys man’s creative imagination and freedom by closing his mind to the possibility of there being anything genuinely new, different, original—by closing his mind to the possibility of real change, creation, revolution. It makes of all these things an impossibility, something *inconceivable*. It also keeps *other* societies’ imaginaries beyond understanding.

Thus, a heteronomous society, with its heteronomous individuals, suffers from a debilitating “cognitive closure,” and “the first, indisputable fact,” Castoriadis says, is that this is so for “*almost all* of the people in a given society.”⁷ As was noted earlier, however, Castoriadis is not one of these people incapacitated by the mainstream cognitive handicap, and hence he is able to “penetrate or reappropriate” the “social imaginary significations” of ancient Greece to see if there is anything *there* relevant for *us*: he is, in summary, engaging in non-trivial thinking by using his radical creative imagination, which is his essence, and has the potential to be the essence of all humans, as long as they are autonomous.

GREECE AND THE AUTONOMOUS SOCIETY

And what is autonomy? We’ve seen heteronomy—our lives are apparently dictated by it—but what is real autonomy? Castoriadis points to Greece. Autonomy is what made Greece great. And Greece was indeed great. It was here, Castoriadis insists, and nowhere else, that politics, democracy, philosophy, science, historiography, impartiality, judging and choosing, rational inquiry and thought itself, “as we know and practice it,” were *created*. Autonomy is what initiated the unprecedented and “hectic pace of creation” in all the fields of human endeavour. And autonomy, according to Castoriadis, and with it the commencement of the most creative period in human history, begins in Athens at around 682 or 683 BC, with, firstly, the establishment of the *annual election* of the *thesmothetai*, who were the ‘judicial magistrates’ and ‘layers down of law’; secondly, with the instating of the citizens of Sparta as equals at around the same time; and, thirdly, with the affirmation of the rule of *nomos*—the rule of law.

“What is important [for us] in ancient Greek political life,” Castoriadis says, is the “*activity* and struggle around the *change* of the institutions, the explicit (even if partial) self-institution of the *polis* as a *permanent process*.”⁸ Instead of passively accepting the decreed laws and norms as though they were set down once and for all and thus beyond reproach,

7. Italics are Castoriadis’. Castoriadis, ‘The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy’, p. 270.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 274-5.

Athenians were actively engaged in constantly reforming their system and altering their rules. This autonomous instituting process eventually led to the establishment of a *direct democracy* in 508 BC, some 175 years later. And it is direct democracy, which Athens was the first approximation of, that Castoriadis advocated throughout his life as the absolute political ideal.⁹ The autonomous “process goes on for almost four centuries,”¹⁰ Castoriadis says, and it is “inseparable” from the coinciding explosion of human creation. Being autonomous—*auto* meaning ‘by-itself’ and *nomos* meaning ‘law’—means being *explicitly* aware that “we posit our own laws,”¹¹ because “autonomy is possible only if society recognizes itself as the source of its norms.”¹²

Of course, *all* societies create themselves, but not all societies are *capable* of *recognizing* themselves as their own creators, and therefore not all societies are capable of “non-trivial thinking,” nor of the explicitly autonomous activity of “judging and choosing in a non-trivial sense.” This is where Castoriadis gets a little bit controversial. He says: “this activity of judging and choosing, and the very idea of it, is a Greco-Western activity and idea—it has been created in this world and nowhere else. The idea would not and could not occur to a Hindu, to a classical Hebrew, to a true Christian or to a Muslim. Classical Hebrews have nothing to choose. They have been given the truth and the Law once and for all by God, and if they started judging and choosing about that they would no longer be Hebrew. Likewise, true Christians have nothing to judge or choose: they have to believe and to love. For, it is written: *Judge not, that ye be not judged* (Matt. 7:1).”¹³ The weakness of this argument shall not be discussed here, but what Castoriadis is insisting on is that autonomy is fundamentally dependent upon the ability to self-consciously judge and choose one’s own truths and laws, which must be self-created. Thus to be autonomous, it appears that one has to strictly be a number of things, including: an anti-capitalist, anti-totalitarian, anti-Marxist (because Marxism was also dependent upon Reason as ultimate principle), a certain sort of existentialist (because of the focus on self-creation), and definitely some kind of anti-Christian/Jewish/Muslim/Hindu atheist or agnostic.

But what about the golden Greeks? They had their gods and their cults and mythology and yet they managed to achieve the epitome of autonomous human greatness. Yes, because in Greece, Castoriadis says, “religion is kept strictly at bay by political activities.”¹⁴ *Justice* in Greece is not the “will of God,” as it is in all other religious societies: it is instead a genuine *human* question that “must remain open forever.” Autonomy, Castoriadis argues, means freedom. Autonomy is the *indeterminate* freedom of the creative imagination. It involves knowing that there are no fixed or pre-determined laws, norms or meanings that we can appeal to; knowing that we are the creators of all

9. L.D. Kritzman, B.J. Reilly and M.B. DeBevoise, *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Columbia University Press, 2007, p. 471.

10. Castoriadis, ‘The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy’, p. 275.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 271.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

these social imaginary significations and hence of our own society. What precisely does this mean for justice though? What *is* this ‘justice’ through which Castoriadis effectively defers the complex exposition of autonomy? Castoriadis answers with the notion of self-limitation. He explains: “In a democracy people *can* do anything—and must know that they *ought not* to do just anything. Democracy is the regime of self-limitation [...] it is the regime of freedom—and a tragic regime.”¹⁵

At this point in the argument, Castoriadis turns to *hubris*. To anyone unfamiliar with ancient Greek tragedy, the discussion of *hubris* might appear here to be an extraneous digression. However, although it certainly does not abridge Castoriadis’ labyrinthine conception of autonomy, the point that is made is revelatory. The term *hubris* means excessive pride, and almost all Greek tragedies unequivocally concern themselves with it. *Hubris* was also a legal term in Greece, and a crime severely punished by law. It is committed when one “is neither willing nor able to hear the discourse and the reasons of the other, of others,”¹⁶ Castoriadis explains elsewhere, and, “he who is possessed by *hubris* exits from the political community of men.”¹⁷ He becomes *apolis*, without a city. Castoriadis argues that *hubris* presupposes freedom and at the same time “it presupposes the absence of fixed norms [...] it exists where self-limitation is the *only* ‘norm’, where limits are transgressed which were nowhere defined.”¹⁸ *Hubris* is ‘intrinsic’ to man precisely because his possibilities are unlimited, and hence, “the ultimate problem of autonomous man: the self-limitation of the individual and of the political community.”¹⁹ This is what the real task of ethics and politics consists in for Castoriadis, and this is why democracy is the regime of not only freedom but of self-limitation.

Castoriadis also describes democracy as “a tragic regime.” It provides no indisputable rules that one can rely on, and no unambiguous principles that one can use as a guide in determining whether an action is right and just. The autonomous freedom allowed by authentic democracy is never without tragic overtones because the fear of slipping unknowingly into the catastrophe of *hubris* is unrelenting. Democracy, as Castoriadis sees it, resembles a tragedy—a Greek tragedy, or, more precisely, an *Athenian* tragedy. He says, “‘Greek tragedy’: that’s a being that does not exist: There is only *Athenian* tragedy, and that is no accident. It is only in Athens that there has been this powerful rise of democracy, and tragedy is a democratic institution in all its aspects and especially in its most deep-seated content.”²⁰ He reiterates elsewhere, “only in the city where the democratic process, the process of self-institution, reached its climax, only there could tragedy (as opposed to simple ‘theatre’) be created.”²¹

15. Ibid.

16. Cornelius. Castoriadis, ‘Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man’, in Anon (ed.), *Figures of the thinkable*, 2005, p. 27.

17. Ibid., p. 25.

18. Castoriadis, ‘The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy’, p. 282.

19. Castoriadis, ‘Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man’, p. 27.

20. Ibid., pp. 5-6.

21. Castoriadis, ‘The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy’, p. 284.

TRAGEDY

Tragedy's profound connection to the rise of the democratic *polis* has indeed been firmly established by classicists and anthropologists alike—Castoriadis is not alone in this view. Most sources indicate that Aeschylus, the 'father of tragedy', was born around 525 BC, Athens became a democracy in 508 BC and Aeschylus' first tragedy was performed in 499 BC. The noteworthy fact that the births of tragedy and democracy directly coincided with one another is immensely significant in deciphering either of these two remarkable creations.

The French anthropologist and specialist in ancient Greece, Jean-Pierre Vernant, who was a contemporary and colleague of Castoriadis, and whose much more rigorously researched work was, I think, crucial in forming Castoriadis' own ideas about tragedy, shows how tragic drama's themes, form, and "the almost obsessive use of a technical legal terminology in the language of the tragic writers,"²² all point to tragedy's preoccupation with the new democracy. The reflection in tragedy of the Greeks' intense and very real interest in politics is almost impossible to still deny. Nietzsche's claim in *The Birth of Tragedy* that tragedy's "purely religious beginnings [...] exclude the whole area of political and social concerns,"²³ is today regarded as being simply 'silly'.²⁴ Although the definitive assertion that "Greek tragedy is [...] shaped by the vital need to create and sustain the *polis*,"²⁵ may perhaps be slightly too strong in its emphasis, the failure to appreciate that tragedy is political is a failure to fully appreciate the art form itself. Vernant gives a more balanced view²⁶ in his investigation into the specific "social and psychological conditions" of the fifth century Athenian. At the forefront of these conditions he places, on the one hand, the emerging *legal and political thought* of the newly democratic Athens—the importance of which, it is made clear, can hardly be overestimated—and on the other, the *mythical and heroic traditions* that had been around for much longer. We encounter tragedy at the centre of these two distinct but coexisting worlds and we can see that tragedy is as political as it is religious.

If Nietzsche focused too exclusively on the "purely religious" side of tragedy, however, Castoriadis focuses too exclusively on its political side. His desire to portray the idealised Greeks as having overcome the heteronomous "cognitive closure" of religion, leads him to give a reading of tragedy that is itself rather closed and limited. The text in question is *Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man*, which is, I believe, Castoriadis'

22. Jean Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd, New York, Zone Books, 1988, p. 31.

23. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, London, Penguin, 1993, p. 36.

24. *Birth of Tragedy's* "exclusion from tragedy of 'the politico-social sphere' [is] one of the silliest features of that marvellously suggestive text." Richard Seaford, 'Something to Do with Dionysus—Tragedy and the Dionysiac', in M. S. Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the tragic : Greek theatre and beyond*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 285.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 293.

26. See, in particular, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and tragedy in Ancient Greece*.

only in-depth analysis specifically dealing with tragedy.²⁷

But why would it even matter what Castoriadis has to say about tragedy? He was, after all, a *political* philosopher, so what does his interpretation of *literature* have to do with anything of consequence? In answer to this, I think it is exceptionally important what Castoriadis says here, not least since he is basing it on *real surviving evidence*—two *complete* texts (Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Sophocles' *Antigone*) that were written in the same period of human history around which Castoriadis has built his entire political and philosophical project. The same cannot be said of much of the other 'evidence' that Castoriadis appeals to in support of his re-imagining of the ancient Greek democratic imaginary. He regularly relies on Plato's, and particularly on Aristotle's, testimonies concerning the origins of democracy, which, in light of other evidence available to us from the time, have been shown to often be inaccurate and heavily biased.²⁸ Plato, the great enemy of democracy, as well as of poetry and tragedy, was born 85 years after, and Aristotle 124 years after, Athens first became a democracy. The Golden Age of Pericles was well and truly over by the time either of the two philosophers appeared on the scene—they witnessed an Athens that was already in decline and that would never again recover its former glory.

Castoriadis was certainly right to emphasize that things had changed drastically within a short amount of time, but I think his version of what happened "ontologically" is somewhat misguided. Vernant writes that "within a hundred years [of tragedy's existence] the tragic seam had already been exhausted and when Aristotle in the fourth century set out, in his *Poetics*, to establish the theory of tragedy, he no longer understood tragic man who had, so to speak, become a stranger."²⁹ Aristotle didn't understand tragedy and Plato explicitly banished it from his Republic. What hope then does Castoriadis have in opening up our comprehension of this very elusive ancient art form and the tragedians behind it who were part of the first generation of democrats in the world?

As for the pre-Socratic philosophers in whom Castoriadis fondly traces the origins of his own politico-philosophical project, not one of their works has survived in complete form. All that is available are quotations by later philosophers and historians—the actual text is very fragmented. Castoriadis says that Anaximander is "the first philosopher for whom we possess reliable testimony,"³⁰ but the only fragment of his that we have is this: "For they make amends and give reparation to one another for their offence, according to the ordinance of time." And that is quoted by the Neoplatonist Simplicius who lived more than a thousand years after Anaximander.³¹ The rest of what we know

27. In any case, it is his most important work on the subject, and the only that has thus far been translated into the English language.

28. See, for example, J.P. Sickinger, *Public records and archives in classical Athens*, University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

29. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 29.

30. Castoriadis, 'The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy', p. 273.

31. The quote is often thought to begin with: "Out of those things whence is the generation for existing things, into these again does their destruction take place, according to what must needs be," but this part

about the archaic philosopher all comes from Aristotle, who wrote some two and half centuries after Anaximander, and from Aristotle's successor's second-hand accounts and interpretations. It is from these 'testimonies' of what Anaximander said that Castoriadis constructed his own version of *apeiron*, which he defines as "the 'element' of being [...] the indeterminate, indefinite—another way of thinking Chaos."³² Elsewhere he says, "being is creation and destruction: the two go together. Anaximander knew that, but little account has been taken of it."³³ This conception of Being as *apeiron*, or Chaos, or indeterminable cycles of creation/destruction, is central to Castoriadis' thinking and it is what frames his entire philosophy—it is revealing to note exactly where it all came from, or rather, what the catalyst behind it was.³⁴ Castoriadis was not the only one to carry out such elaborate reconstructions of the scant evidence, however. Nietzsche was also greatly influenced by the Anaximander fragment in his early work,³⁵ as was Heidegger, who wrote extensively on it in light of his own philosophy and conception of Being.³⁶

To return to tragedy now: the fact that these few tragic texts have survived while almost everything else from the period has perished makes them all the more indispensable. They are central among the handful of meaningful pieces of evidence that we have available to us, and should therefore be considered seriously. Castoriadis, however, offers a reading of tragedy that is far from impartial. He frequently seems more inclined to draw somewhat pertinacious conclusions from his personal vision of Greek history and philosophy, and to find here justifications for his own political ideal, which, as he argued, had been most closely appropriated by the "Greek imaginary." This Greek imaginary that Castoriadis *re*-imagines is of course also to be discovered at the root of tragedy, as he shall soon show us.

It is significant to note that Castoriadis' colleague Vernant had already written at length about the Greek tragic imaginary some years before Castoriadis himself set out to

is most likely Simplicius talking rather than the quote itself. Although both Nietzsche's and Heidegger's translations of the fragment include this sentence, there is evidence which suggests that it was in fact not part of the quotation itself. Ancient Greek was written without punctuation and hence the difficulty of interpretation. For a discussion of this, see Charles H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the origins of Greek cosmology*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1994, pp. 166-96.

32. Castoriadis, 'The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy', p. 273.

33. Cornelius Castoriadis, *World in fragments : writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination*, trans. David Ames Curtis, Stanford University Press, 1997c, p. 101.

34. In many regards, Castoriadis was indeed "a Greek philosopher par excellence. He did not fit into the tradition of modern French philosophy [...] Castoriadis' precursors were the Presocratics, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics." Peter Murphy, 'Castoriadis, Cornelius', in George Ritzer, *Encyclopedia of social theory, Volume 1*, vol. 1, 2 vols., London, Sage, 2005, p. 83.

35. For example, Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music*. Anaximander is also discussed at greater length in Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. M. Cowan, Regnery Publishing, 1996.

36. Castoriadis notes wryly that "Heidegger's 'interpretation' of it [the Anaximander fragment...] is, as usual, Heidegger dressed up as Anaximander." Castoriadis, 'The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy', p. 289.

do so.³⁷ Vernant's highly influential work on tragedy had clearly impacted Castoriadis' thoughts on the subject greatly. Vernant proceeded to examine what he called the "mental universe," "mental world," or "mental context" (of the Greeks), which he defined as the specific and particular "human world of meanings [...which] comprises verbal and intellectual equipment, categories of thought, types of reasoning, the system of representations, beliefs and values, forms of sensibility."³⁸ Vernant's description of what an imaginary/mental world consists of is practically identical to Castoriadis', which involves the "creation of a human world: of 'things,' 'reality,' language, norms, values, ways of life and death [... where each particular society posits a] particular complex of rules, laws, meanings, values, tools, motivations, etc."³⁹ However, while Castoriadis practically skims over what little tangible evidence there is in order to carry out the project of re-imagining the tragic world, Vernant treats the evidence as the starting point. The difference between the two approaches could perhaps be explained by the fact that Vernant worked as an anthropologist and historian, whereas Castoriadis was, first and foremost, a philosopher whose philosophy in many ways depended on his own particular rendition of ancient Greece. He set out to prove not only that his vision of radical autonomy was theoretically possible, but that it had already been realised once or twice⁴⁰ in the past—and it was no accident that these were precisely the greatest moments in human history. It is due to this stunningly ambitious political and philosophical conviction that Castoriadis' reading of the tragic texts loses (at least factual) integrity.

RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY

Castoriadis' argument in *Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man*, is that, "the juxtaposition of these two poets [Aeschylus and Sophocles] shows us clearly an ontological overthrow of enormous importance that occurred during this twenty-year period."⁴¹ He says that "the answers given by these two tragedies [to the question of 'what is man?'] are diametrically opposed," and this difference "reflects the unprecedented pace of cultural creation in democratic Athens and is consubstantial with it. The traditional representations were more and more radically being dismissed; man's self-knowledge

37. Vernant's *The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece* (which is reprinted in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and tragedy in Ancient Greece.*) was first published in 1968. Castoriadis was at this time still writing almost exclusively on Marxism.

38. Vernant continues, "and the modalities of action and of agent. We might describe it as a mental world peculiar to the Greeks of the fifth century were it not that such a formula runs a severe risk of being misunderstood. It might suggest that a mental domain already existed somewhere, fully established, and that all tragedy had to do was reflect it in its own particular way. But no mental universe exists as such, over and above the collection of diverse practices that man follows and constantly renews within the field of social life and cultural creation." *Ibid.*, p. 30.

39. Castoriadis, 'The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy', p. 269.

40. I.e. In Athens, and in the revival of Athens—that is, in the post-twelfth century Renaissance and Enlightenment states where 'modernity' was created. See Murphy, 'Castoriadis, Cornelius', p. 82.

41. Castoriadis, 'Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man', p. 12.

was being enlarged and deepened.”⁴² He concludes by saying that, “in a quarter century, Greek self-knowledge passed from the idea of a divine anthropogony to the idea of man’s self-creation.”⁴³ Castoriadis’ argument is that the ontological question of “what is man?” is answered by Aeschylus with a divine anthropogony: man is whatever a god made him to be, and whatever he has he was given by the god Prometheus a long time ago. The creation of man, “Aeschylus *cannot* think it qua self-creation, as Sophocles will do,”⁴⁴ says Castoriadis, because the archaic Aeschylus is still heteronomous—trapped by the cognitive closure of his faith in the gods, not yet *capable* of the deeper self-knowledge that only comes with autonomy. But, “nothing of the sort in Sophocles,”⁴⁵ Castoriadis says. Here, man creates himself, and everything that he has, he gives to himself. Sophocles “posits humanity as self-creation. Men have taken nothing from the gods, and no god has given them anything whatsoever. That is the spirit of the fifth century, and it is to *this* tragedy [Antigone] that the Athenians gave the laurel wreath.”⁴⁶

On several occasions, Castoriadis reminds us that it is “of relative indifference for us to know whether” Aeschylus and Sophocles actually “believed” the statements that they proposed in their tragedies. In brackets he adds, however: “although they certainly did believe them.”⁴⁷ A number of things are hence implied here, albeit indirectly, about Aeschylus and Sophocles *personally*. One of them is that Aeschylus, unlike Sophocles, could not have been a truly democratic citizen, because he was himself not yet a truly autonomous individual. He is seen in light of this as the lesser of the two poets. Another thing that Castoriadis cunningly implies, here and elsewhere, is that Sophocles was something of an atheist, which was due of course to his deepening and very democratic self-understanding. The importance of religion and the gods within the imaginaries of both poets is continuously and deliberately diminished by Castoriadis’ reading, and this, I think, is his gravest offence.

Firstly, Aeschylus *was* a democrat. He was seventeen years old when Athens became a democracy and from all the evidence we have on his life, he was an active and revered citizen of a city undergoing what he felt was an exhilarating and inspiring revolution. Athenians were proud of their social and political achievements, and Aeschylus was no exception. He famously fought for his *polis* on three separate occasions during the Persian Wars, where one of his brothers was killed. His epitaph, said to have been written by himself, doesn’t even mention that he was a celebrated playwright and that he had written some seventy tragedies over his lifetime which would continue to be quoted from as though they were the Bible⁴⁸ for generations to come: the only achievement

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

48. “The Greek boy who studied Homer and the other poets [...] was studying the literature and history of his country, and the equivalent of our Bible.” Desmond Lee, introduction to Plato, ‘The Republic’, trans. H.D.P. Lee, London, Penguin Books, 1974, p. xxxvii.

of his life he thought worthy of recording on his tombstone was that he had fought as an Athenian citizen in the Persian Wars.⁴⁹ Aeschylus reiterated his support for the new democracy repeatedly, throughout almost all his tragedies, and even had the ultimate Athenian citizen Pericles serving as the honorary financier for the production of one of them, the *Persians*. His tragedies have courts and juries, voting and acquitting, the laying down of laws, and constant debates about justice. There is no doubt that Aeschylus was a democrat who was fully aware that his society was instituting its own laws, which were decided, and therefore ‘self-created’, by the citizens. And yet there is also no doubt that Aeschylus was religious, and profoundly so.⁵⁰ What can be said of his autonomy then? Was he autonomous in matters of politics and heteronomous in everything else—such as in his Promethean anthropogony?

Castoriadis mentions in passing in another text that “the *emergence* of autonomy in Greece was *conditioned* by the non-unitary Greek view of the world that is expressed from the beginning in the Greek ‘myths.’” What he means by this is that he at least acknowledges that Greek religion was fundamentally different from a religion such as Christianity: it did not advocate a strictly “closed” theology with its promise of a “total and ‘rational’ (and therefore ‘meaningful’) order in the world, along with the necessary implication that there is an order of human affairs linked to the order of the world—what one could call unitary ontology.”⁵¹ Greek myths stayed out of society’s democratic self-creation, because “in Greece, religion is kept strictly at bay by political activities.”⁵² Politics in Greece is secular, and I think Castoriadis is absolutely right to insist on this. But was this secularity hostile to Greek religion, and an objection to it, or were the two compatible and perhaps even complementary? Castoriadis would probably argue that the former was the case: it is *in spite* of religion that Greek politics managed its secularity (and thus its autonomy), which was itself only possible so long as the religion (with its heteronomous determinations) could be pushed away. A secular (and thus autonomous) politics could only have been realised by and through an essentially non-religious social movement. And Aeschylus, who was still under the clutches of a “mythical and religious tradition,”⁵³ could clearly not have been a part of this godless revolution.

Sophocles, on the other hand, “we do not know what Sophocles thought of the gods [...but] we know that he belonged to Pericles’ circle, as did Protagoras, who said, ‘As for the gods, I can know nothing; neither how they are, nor if they are, nor if they are not,

49. Aeschylus was “a democrat who fought as well as wrote.” His epitaph read :

Beneath this stone lies Aeschylus of Athens, Euphorion’s son
who died in the fields of Gela rich in wheat.

His strength, his glory the grove of Marathon can praise
and the long-haired Persian—he learned it well.

Introduction to Aeschylus, ‘The Oresteia’, trans. Robert Fagles, London, Penguin Books, 1984, pp. 94-5.

50. Fagles contends that “Aeschylus is the great religious visionary.” *Ibid.*, p. 95.

51. Castoriadis, ‘The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy’, p. 274.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 282.

53. Castoriadis, ‘Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man’, p. 8.

nor about how they might look?”⁵⁴ Castoriadis stops short of calling Sophocles an atheist, although he does suggest the next best thing—that he was most probably an agnostic like the sophist Protagoras. How is one to explain the irrepressibly pious prayers and hymns and invocations of gods that make up a substantial part of Sophoclean tragedy then? Castoriadis rationalises that all that religious talk in Sophocles has a “concrete content”⁵⁵—it only ever concerns the community and the things that are necessary for the community (such as the necessity of burying the dead, regardless of whether they were upright citizens or traitors like Antigone’s brother Polynices). Even in the case of Aeschylus, Castoriadis exclaims, “the first thing we notice—which forces itself on us and which I simply present here—is huge, astonishing: Aeschylus speaks of manticism and not of religion; he mentions the gods only in passing and from a utilitarian perspective. The entrails of sacrificial victims have to be examined in order to see if they suit ‘the pleasure of the gods.’”⁵⁶ Castoriadis’ excitement is palpable—the gods are merely there for “utilitarian” and “concrete” purposes.

This downsizing of religion is carried out by Castoriadis at every possible turn. Consider his ‘interpretation’ of the meaning of Sophocles’ celebrated *Antigone* ode: “Nothing is more awesome, astonishing, achievement-capable, than man. And I ask once again: Do we dare take the poet seriously? Are we to assume that the poet is using the words at random? Master of the exactitude and pertinency of words, Sophocles says loud and clear: nothing. [...] Nothing. Nothing: therefore, not even the gods.”⁵⁷ Man is even more awesome and astonishing than the gods, Castoriadis concludes, because the gods, and all of nature, can only ever be exactly “what they are” and nothing more—“their faculties have been given to them once and for all.” Man, on the other hand, is his own creator; he is “self-created” and he gives himself everything that he has. Castoriadis reassures us “that this is Sophocles’ conception may be ascertained without any doubt on the basis of one word [...] *edidaxato*, he taught himself.”⁵⁸ On the basis of this one word, Castoriadis assumes a great deal indeed about Sophocles.

CONQUEST AND PUNISHMENT

The *Antigone* ode, when taken in its entirety, is important in characterising Sophocles, and Castoriadis is right to use it as a prime example of the marked differences that separate the two tragedians. Unfortunately though, Castoriadis fails to point out most of these differences, concentrating instead almost exclusively on a rather forced reading of Sophoclean “self-creation,” which is sharply contrasted with Aeschylus’ mythical anthropogony. What is more interesting to note in this ode, however, is the manner in which Sophocles posits man within the natural world. Here is the *Antigone* ode:

54. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

Numberless wonders

terrible wonders walk the world but none the match for man [...]
 and the oldest of the gods he wears away—
 the Earth, the immortal, the inexhaustible—
 as his plows go back and forth, year in, year out [...]
 And the blithe, lightheaded race of birds he snares,
 the tribes of savage beasts, the life that swarms the depths—
 with one fling of his nets woven and coiled tight, he takes them all,
 man the skilled, the brilliant!
 He conquers all [...]
 And speech and thought, quick as the wind
 and the mood and mind for law that rules the city—
 all these he has taught himself.
 (*Antigone*, 377ff.)

A similar ode concerning man and nature can be found in Aeschylus:

Marvels, the Earth breeds many marvels,
 Terrible marvels overwhelm us.
 The heaving arms of the sea embrace and swarm
 with savage life. And high in no man's land of night
 torches hang like swords. The hawk on the wing,
 the beast astride the fields
 can tell of the whirlwind's fury roaring strong.
 Oh but a man's high daring spirit,
 Who can account for that?
 (Libation Bearers, 574ff.)

In Aeschylus, man cannot overcome nature and cannot tame it as confidently as Sophocles had described. This does not mean, however, that man is any less great in Aeschylus' vision. Even next to an overwhelming natural world, the marvel of man and his "high daring spirit" is astounding. Aeschylus was grateful to the earth and to the gods and he worshipped the whole of nature, its eternal cycles of destruction and regeneration⁵⁹ alike: "the Earth herself who brings all things to life and makes them strong, then gathers in the rising tide once more" (*Libation Bearers*, 131ff.); "There is the sea and who will drain it dry? Precious as silver, inexhaustible, ever-new, it breeds the more we reap it" (*Agamemnon*, 958ff.). The respect and awe that Aeschylus had towards nature began to decrease in Sophocles, who, like his good friend Pericles, speaks of conquering and controlling all that is not human (or Athenian). Nothing in nature is a "match for man," Sophocles says, "the oldest of the gods he wears away—the Earth." And as for all the creatures of the earth, "he takes them all, man the skilled, the brilliant!

59. Contrary to what Castoriadis argues, the destruction/creation 'order' of the world certainly does have a meaning for tragic man—the tragic divine is embedded in nature and its cycles of birth and death. It is thus very misleading to say, as Castoriadis does, that "the order of the world has no 'meaning' for man: it posits the blind necessity of genesis and birth, on the one hand, of corruption and catastrophe [...] on the other." Castoriadis, "The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy," p. 273.

He conquers all.” Man “the brilliant” is here set up as opposed to nature, no longer a part of it, but wishing to dominate it. Castoriadis not only fails to mention that Sophocles is espousing a direct recipe for that ‘pseudorational pseudomastery’ which has gone on to wreak irreparable environmental damage, but he praises this imperialist self-confidence and affirms, “such were the people about whom Pericles would say [...] ‘[we have] forced every land and every sea to make way for our daring.’”⁶⁰

To Sophocles’ credit, however, he does also offer a contrasting anti-imperialist stance later on in the tragedy: “True, our dreams, our high hopes voyaging far and wide bring sheer delight to many, to many others delusion, blithe, mindless lusts” (*Antigone*, 689ff.). In fact, Sophocles presents this contrast between greatness and ruin—or the fall from grace—in most, if not all of his tragedies, and in the end he truly stands by Zeus’ often evoked eternal law which dictates that “no towering form of greatness enters into the lives of mortals free and clear of ruin” (*Antigone*, 686ff.). In light of this, Sophocles appears to be far more pronouncedly conservative than Castoriadis would care to admit. While it is true that his tragedies reflect the Athenians’ self-assured superiority and their daring self-confidence, all these things are ultimately crushed by greater forces—by the gods and the pre-ordained “mighty blows of fate” (*Antigone*, 1469) from which no man can escape. Fate in Sophocles is a hostile and malicious force which drives the heroes and most of their family members to suicide, self-mutilation and/or complete resignation from life—the final dismal words of *Oedipus the King* are: “Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last” (*Oedipus*, 1683ff.). The chorus sing these cautionary lines after they recount the horrendous fate of their king Oedipus, who has just blinded himself upon finding his wife, who is also his mother, hanging by the neck. Oedipus has fulfilled his cruel destiny. He rose to enviable greatness and became a “man beyond all power,” only to be brutally destroyed by a “black sea of terror” (*Oedipus*, 1682). Similarly, in *Antigone*, after a succession of triple suicides, the final lines of the chorus are: “The mighty words of the proud are paid in full with mighty blows of fate” (*Antigone*, 1467ff.). Aeschylus likewise warns of the dangers of excessive pride throughout his tragedies: “From their high-towering hopes [Zeus] hurls mortals to their destruction” (*Suppliants*, 98ff.); and, “man is mortal and must learn to curb his pride” (*Persians*, 819).

Castoriadis rightly says that in tragedy, “there is above all the question of human *hubris*, of the irresistible push of man toward excess and its limitations.”⁶¹ It is his most astute observation, I think, to then connect this tragic *hubris*/self-limitation with democracy, whose “central question” also happens to be “the question of self-limitation.”⁶² Both institutions (tragedy and democracy) are confronted by the ‘tragic’ dilemma that there are no clear limitations or rules ‘out there’ which man can follow—this is what Castoriadis means when he says that “Being is Chaos.” And, as a result of this dilemma being so problematic for society (as tragedy spectacularly demonstrates), both institutions are

60. Castoriadis, ‘Aeschylean Anthropogony and Sophoclean Self-Creation of Man’, p. 23.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

62. *Ibid.*

forced to think of some kind of solution. This is in reality the quintessentially difficult question of ethics, and it is answered by both tragedy and democracy with the notion of self-limitation, or ‘*hubris*-curbing’. Once again, this is why democracy is a “tragic regime,” and it is why tragedy is indeed deeply political.

Castoriadis is also correct to stress that ethics is a purely human affair. The desperate need for an ethical system is brought about by the wisdom that humans learn through suffering the consequences of living in a ‘chaotic’ world. “At long last those [mighty blows of fate] will teach us wisdom” (*Antigone*, 1467ff.), Sophocles says. And in Aeschylus: “Justice turns the balance scales, sees that we suffer and we suffer and we learn” (*Agamemnon*, 250ff.). Tragedy’s often evoked and multifaceted goddess called ‘Justice’ (*dikē*) is to be understood as an element that is distinct from the democratically created ‘ethics’, which is instituted through human *nomos*, or man-made laws. Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy demonstrates precisely this distinction, which I would now like to consider for a moment.⁶³

ETHICS: THE SOLUTION OF AESCHYLUS

The *Oresteia* traces a family’s self-destruction. It seeks for a way out of the cycle of violence and suffering that man inflicts upon himself and those around him. Aeschylus, the warrior-poet, seeks peace, and by the end of the trilogy he delivers it. Beginning with *Agamemnon*, we are introduced to the world of Clytaemnestra. Here justice is seen from *her* eyes. Her daughter, Iphigenia, “girl of tears” (*Agamemnon*, 1554), has been sacrificed cruelly by her husband, the king of kings, Agamemnon. The chorus recalls: “his [Agamemnon’s] spirit veering black, impure, unholy... Yes, he had the heart to sacrifice his daughter” (218ff.). The chorus who both respect and fear the queen know that she is “Fury child-avenging Fury” (156)—that is her “single-minded” purpose and the justification for her crime. Moments before Agamemnon’s victorious homecoming, the chorus sings, “Justice [...] she steers all things towards their destined end” (761ff.). At this point Agamemnon enters, right in time to be brought to his “destined end.” He makes a pompous speech, ironically invoking *dikē* and claiming to have the gods on his side: “First, with justice I salute my Argos and my gods, my accomplices who brought me home and won my rights from Priam’s Troy—the just gods” (797ff.). Agamemnon is completely oblivious to the forces that have already been set in motion and that are about to destroy him. Clytaemnestra cries menacingly, “Quickly. Let the red stream flow [...] Justice, lead him in!” (902ff.). The king obeys and the chorus cries, “the end is coming/ Justice comes to birth” (1000ff.). Agamemnon is made into a corpse by his wife’s right hand, and she proclaims that her crime is “a masterpiece of Justice” (1430). The chorus express their outrage at the murder but admit that it is justice: “Each charge meets counter-charge. None can judge between them. Justice” (1588ff.).

Next in the trilogy is the *Libation Bearers*. Here Aeschylus replaces the world of

63. In relation to the trilogy, Castoriadis mentions in passing, “the much commented upon (rightly, if insufficiently) Aeschylean vindication of public justice against private vengeance.” Castoriadis, “The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy”, p. 284.

Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra's world, with that of his two new protagonists. We see things now from the eyes of the children, the next generation: Electra and Orestes. From this perspective, Agamemnon is nothing other than a "noble eagle father" (*Libation Bearers*, 251), calling for the just revenge of his murder. Iphigenia is almost entirely forgotten. She is mentioned only once, and not even by name: "my sister, sacrificed on the cruel sword" (244ff.). That the one who sacrificed her, her murderer, was her father, and that Clytaemnestra's crime was in the name of avenging her (the major theme of *Agamemnon*), is never once alluded to. Clytaemnestra, *Agamemnon*'s glorious "child-avenging Fury" acting in the name of justice, is in the *Libation Bearers* reduced to nothing but the despised killer of her children's father.

The change in perspective leads to more than just a transformation of roles (from *Agamemnon*, where Iphigenia is victim, Agamemnon murderer, and Clytaemnestra avenger; to *Libation Bearers*, where Agamemnon is victim, Clytaemnestra murderer, and Orestes avenger). Change in perspective also leads to a transformation⁶⁴ of reality, of truth, and of justice. All is subjective. Perspective determines definition (i.e. role), and judgment is always dependent on this. By the end of the second play of the *Oresteia* trilogy, we see that it is as Nietzsche says: "all that exists is just and unjust."⁶⁵ The same act is both right and wrong, depending on whose perspective we are looking from.⁶⁶

In the final play of the trilogy, the *Eumenides*, we see Orestes kneeling at an altar. He is surrounded by the sleeping Furies who have driven him here. Orestes holds in one hand a pious suppliant's branch, in the other a bloody sword. He is insane. The unbearable weight of moral complexity must be eased. The Furies, stirred to action by the ghost of Clytaemnestra, "must hunt the man [Orestes] for Justice" (*Eumenides*, 228ff.). Orestes pleads Athena to tell him whether he was right to commit the matricide: "were we just or not? Judge us now" (482). Athena knows that she cannot settle the matter on her own, so she founds a human tribunal. Apollo contends in the name of Zeus that Orestes is just. "This is *his* [Zeus'] justice—omnipotent, I warn you" (626), Apollo threatens. The Furies are not satisfied with this answer and upon their interrogation Apollo retorts to the simple argument that it is worse to kill a father than a mother, because "the woman you call the mother of the child is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed [...] the *man* is the source of life" (666ff.). He exhibits Athena as the "living witness" (674) to this. Athena herself employs the same argument in support of Orestes: "I honour the male [...] with all my heart I am my Father's child. I cannot set more store by the woman's death [...] Even if the vote is equal, Orestes wins" (752ff.). The citizens vote, and it is a tie. Orestes is acquitted and set free from the Furies. To appease their rage, Athena reassures the Furies, "you were not defeated—the vote was tied" (806ff.). She offers them a place in Athens and more power than they've ever had. They accept,

64. Gould speaks of "The shifting 'worlds' of the *Oresteia* which are [...] mediated by changes in the factitive identity of the chorus." John Gould, 'Tragedy and Collective Experience', in Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the tragic : Greek theatre and beyond*, p. 243.

65. Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music*, p. 51.

66. Garvie discusses this moral complexity, that is, subjectivity, in detail in A. F. Garvie, 'The Tragedy of the *Oresteia*', in Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the tragic : Greek theatre and beyond*.

and feeling “the hate, the fury slip away” (908ff.), they become “the kindly ones.”

Everything is solved and everyone is happy. And yet, as A.F. Garvie asks, “can we really be satisfied with a solution that finds so simple an answer to the great problems of human life?” Garvie argues that there is a dividing line separating the *Eumenides* from the first two plays of the trilogy. Whereas the first two plays present moral complexities and insoluble problems that humans still face today, “in *Eumenides* a solution is apparently found—one, moreover, that is closely tied to a peculiarly fifth-century Athenian institution, the Areopagus.” He goes on to conclude that, “The trilogy ends ‘happily’, but it may be that Aeschylus himself was well aware that the real problems remain unresolved.” And because of this knowledge, “the moral complexities of the first two plays are given no solution,”⁶⁷ he says. Vernant similarly notes in relation to the play, “The questions are posed but the tragic consciousness can find no fully satisfactory answers to them and so they remain open.”⁶⁸ The possibility that a tragedy as tragic as the *Oresteia* could have a happy conclusive ending is passionately rejected by many, who either, along with such influential critics as George Steiner, sternly believe that tragedies must end ‘badly’, or at least that tragic problems and questions can never be answered. But despite convincing arguments, and despite the “elegant confusion” spread by many classicists, “there is no doubt that the ending of the *Oresteia* answers the questions, however much we may dislike the answers, the way they are arrived at, or the very idea of questions being answered.”⁶⁹

What exactly are these questions posed by the *Oresteia*? And what are the answers? The first two plays, as Garvie argues, are indeed morally ‘complex’. Clytaemnestra and Orestes both act in the name of their own subjective justice, they seek their own personal *dikē*, and within their own worlds, their actions are justified. In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus shows us Clytaemnestra’s world, and in *Libation Bearers* he shows us Orestes’. When read as *individual* plays, each protagonist in his/her own world appears to be justified. When read *together*, however, this justification becomes problematic, that is, we begin to see its complexity. Therefore, one could say that the questions Aeschylus is posing are: What is the place of subjective, personal, individual justice in a world where there is more than one person?; How can one individual’s (personal) justice be kept from causing (personal) injustice to another individual?; How to reconcile the individual and the collective, the citizen and the *polis*?

Aeschylus’ ultimate desire is for peace and harmony. The last 250 lines of the *Eumenides* are precisely to that effect. Athena tells the Furies to “lull asleep that salt black wave of anger” (842); she pleads them to come to their new home in Athens, “where all the pain and anguish end” (902); she tells them to sing “nothing that strikes a note of brutal conquest. Only peace” (913). But it is the peace and harmony of the *polis* that Athena, and Aeschylus, are urging above all: “Here in our homeland never cast the

67. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

68. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 33.

69. Richard Seaford, ‘Something to Do with Dionysus—Tragedy and the Dionysiac’, in Silk (ed.), *Tragedy and the tragic : Greek theatre and beyond*, p. 292.

stones that whet our bloodlust [...] Let our wars rage on abroad, with all their force, to satisfy our powerful lust for fame. But as for the bird that fights at home—my curse on civil war” (867ff.). This condemnation of civil war is repeated by the Furies at 897ff, and again by Athena at 1017ff. At the close of *Agamemnon*, Clytaemnestra cried, “If we could end the suffering, how we would rejoice” (1693). The pain and destruction that neither her nor Orestes were able to bring to an end are finally resolved in the *Eumenides*. Aeschylus shows that, instead of the unconditional demand for personal justice, in the name of which both individual and collective suffer, what is more important is peace. The hope is that the savage instinct (Fury) that blinds the individual from the ideal of collective harmony, driving his personal justice towards acts of destruction, will be tamed. The transformation of the wrathful Furies into the “kindly” Eumenides is one of the solutions Aeschylus provides us with. The other is the creation of a law court. Both are directed towards Aeschylus’ desire for peace and harmony, and for the prevention of destruction and suffering.

Justice in the *Oresteia*, as in all mythical thought, is never of a morally absolute nature. We need only take one look at Clytaemnestra in her world, next to Orestes in his, to be reminded of this. The tragic mother and son are, in Nietzsche’s words, “both individually in the right, but each merely one individual beside another.”⁷⁰ *Dikē* is fluid and indefinite—it belongs to what Vernant describes as a tragic “universe of ambiguous values where nothing is ever stable or unequivocal.”⁷¹ *Dikē* can never be resolved nor defined; it has a complexity that is indeed insoluble. Even Aeschylus’ “profound [...] longing for justice”⁷² does not blind him from this.

The question of whether Orestes’ crime was “just or not” is not answered in the absolute. While Apollo confidently declares that his suppliant is just, the Furies seem to have perhaps an even better argument that he is not. The young god is insolent and his conduct throughout the case is questionable.⁷³ The Furies, on the other hand, speak with ancient wisdom and in strength of argument they reduce, if not defeat, first Orestes and then Apollo, both of whose arguments dwindle down to the claim that “the mother of the child is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed” (666ff.). Athena,⁷⁴ who acts as a mediator between the two sides, casts her lot for Orestes. Her decision has nothing to do with ‘true’ objective justice; rather it is, as is the case with all morality in the *Oresteia*, subjective. Her reason is that, since no mother gave her birth and she is purely her “Father’s child,” she always honours the male, and thus, “cannot set more store by the

70. Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music*, p. 50.

71. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 26.

72. Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music*, p. 48.

73. Apollo’s ‘questionable conduct’ is discussed in more detail by Fagles: “One wonders if Apollo even knows ‘the rules of justice’. He can only swell Orestes’ defence with his own windy threats; he relies on Father Zeus [...] Athena cuts him short before he makes a mockery of the proceedings.” Introduction to Aeschylus, ‘The Oresteia’, pp. 79-80. Also, it is impossible to forget Apollo’s very ‘questionable conduct’ towards his priestess Cassandra.

74. That Apollo exhibits Athena as evidence that a father is the ‘source of life’ is “in Jane Harrison’s words ‘a desperate theological expedient to rid [Athena] of her matriarchal conditions’. Worst of all, it is a kind of blackmail—you are an Olympian, Apollo thunders, you will vote for us.” *Ibid.*, p. 80.

woman's death" (751ff.). Divine *dikē*, despite being constantly invoked throughout the trilogy, is never once mentioned by Athena in relation to Orestes or his acquittal.

Orestes' crime is not just. But it is not unjust. The lots are equal, the jury is divided: the law court is not the voice of 'true' justice, but it does bring the conflict to an end. Orestes' acquittal is in the name of social harmony, the prevention of further suffering. As one critic has noted, "the audience of *Eumenides* is invited, therefore, to conclude that their city is fortunate in possessing a mechanism not for discerning where true justice lies, but for circumventing interminable cycles of personal vengeance."⁷⁵ The collective's involvement turns the private dispute into peace, for the benefit of all involved. Harmony is reached through a "rational compromise,"⁷⁶ not through a redefinition of *dikē*.⁷⁷ It is the "mean" of democracy that Athena urges the audience to "worship" (710).

Aeschylus' ethical solution is a pragmatic endeavor. *Dikē* may have been with the ambiguous gods—we see the righteous *dikē* of one god contrasted with the equally righteous *dikē* of another—but *ethics* was in human hands. The rational nature of politics and the democratic ethical system, where one must judge and choose, and unambiguously determine who and what to vote for, is openly embraced by Aeschylus.

THE GODS

Dikē is a matter that humans should and must deal with, and *can* deal with through a human democracy. There is no need to obliterate the gods for this to become a reality, as Castoriadis seems to suggest. And there is no need either to turn the divine into what Plato turned it into—perfect, absolute Forms. Pre-Plato, the gods were not "extrasocial"⁷⁸ forces any more than human emotions and drives and nature are extrasocial. In Aeschylus' world, humans communicated with their gods and spirits not passively through quiet prayers, but passionately, through shouted and chanted invocations that demanded to be heard. Forces were summoned for the *power* they brought: Orestes prays to his dead father, "give me the power now to rule our house" (*Libation Bearers*, 467); and Electra, hungry like her mother, tells the goddess of the underworld, "O Persephone, give us power—lovely, gorgeous power!" (477); and elsewhere, she chants demonically, "Zeus, crush their skulls! Kill! Kill!" (390). The invitation of gods into human battles was common in Greek tragedy, where one could not win without divine assistance. But although the gods were blamed and praised for whatever the final outcome happened to have been, it was *people* who fought the battles

75. D. Cairns, 'Values', in J. Gregory (ed.), *A companion to Greek tragedy*, Blackwell Publishers, 2005, p. 307.

76. "Both [the *Suppliants* and *Prometheus Bound*] belong to trilogies which, like the *Oresteia*, present a struggle between opposing rights or principles, and trace its course through successive crises to its solution in a rational compromise." P. Vellacott, introduction to Aeschylus, 'Prometheus Bound and other plays', trans. Philip Vellacott, London, Penguin Books, 1961, p. 7.

77. See Cairns: "*Eumenides* introduces no new, abstract conception of *dikē* as justice to contrast with the *dikē* as retaliation." D. Cairns, 'Values', in Gregory (ed.), *A companion to Greek tragedy*, p. 306.

78. Castoriadis says that an autonomous society cannot have any "extrasocial" standards: it cannot ground its politics in either Nature, Reason, History, nor Religion. Castoriadis, 'The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy', p. 281.

and ultimately settled matters. What determined their success was their strength, the most vital source of which they located in the divine. The more that people believed that the divine forces were aiding them, the stronger they grew. It was man's *confidence* that god was on his side that mattered, for that was what brought him the fearlessness and raw energy necessary for victory. Especially at a time of war, doubt could not be tolerated. In *Seven Against Thebes*, the panic-stricken chorus of women howl in horror as the enemy surrounds their city. The sounds they describe are terrifying: "The bits, gripped between horses' teeth, Are piping a song for killing" (110ff.). Out of desperation, they cry and throw themselves at statues of their gods, praying for salvation as if they were already conquered. "Hold your miserable tongues" (63), their unsympathetic king Eteocles demands, outraged at their behaviour. Though he acknowledges that they have a right to honour the gods, Eteocles threatens the women with death if they continue to pray in a way that arouses cowardice instead of courage: "Stop clinging to these statues; make a better prayer, That the gods will fight for us [...] raise with good heart the strong cry of victory [...] To inspire our men and make them fearless in the field" (65ff.). That was what the gods were to the Greeks—a source of power. They were not prayed to for no reason, but for what they gave to their worshippers. And they could give whatever was asked of them. A whole pantheon of deities, each with their own particular power, awaited ready to be summoned (or accused) by the devout Greek believer.⁷⁹

The reality of the gods is something that is never questioned by Aeschylus. They are there just like the rest of nature is there. Invisible winds blow, and, in the same way, invisible forces stir. Prayers and rituals, although performed by actors, are urgent and serious in Aeschylus' tragedy. And the ecstatic singing and dancing, and all the resounding violence, are terrifying in a very real way. So real was the fear aroused by the original ancient performances that people were said to have fainted, and women to have miscarried, when they saw such figures as the demonic Furies wailing from the stage.⁸⁰ The authenticity with which Aeschylus approached his tragedies, and the reality of all that he allows us to witness, apparently even led to the poet's prosecution: sources indicate that Aeschylus was brought to trial for exposing, through his tragedy, the guarded secrets of the Eleusinian Mysteries—an extremely secretive religious cult that most Athenians, including Aeschylus, were initiates of.⁸¹ The rituals that Aeschylus had his actors perform on stage were much more than mere fantasy: they were enactments of actual cult practices, and in some moments, tragedy *became* ritual reality.⁸²

In Sophocles, the divine is transformed into something entirely different:

79. In this sense, Castoriadis' assertion that the gods only served "utilitarian" and "concrete" purposes is appropriate.

80. See Fagles' introduction to Aeschylus, 'The Oresteia', pp. 89-90.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

82. For the argument that certain moments of tragedy have real ritual power, i.e., that drama reverts to "ritual reality," see P.E. Easterling, 'Tragedy and Ritual', *Métis* 3, 1988, pp. 87-109. For an in depth analysis of ritual within tragedy, see also the unsurpassed Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *Tragedy and Athenian religion*, Oxford, Lexington Books, 2003.

Never again will I go reverent to Delphi,
 the inviolate heart of Earth
 or Apollo's ancient oracle at Abae
 or Olympia of the fires—
 unless these prophecies all come true
 for all mankind to point toward in wonder [...]
 Nowhere Apollo's golden glory now—
 the gods, the gods go down.
 (Oedipus the King, 985ff.)

Sophocles does what Aeschylus never would have dared to—he puts religion into question. Of course, by the end of the play, the divine prophecies are fulfilled and everyone can rest assured that the terrible gods really do exist. They are not the same as before, however; nothing is quite the same in this new world that Sophocles has created. The gods are distant and man's faith in them wavers. The chorus prays: "If ever, once in the past, you stopped some ruin," they seem sceptical of even this much, "come now, come down once more!" (186ff.). The gods do not answer, and the chorus continues their hopeless begging. Instead of invoking powerful forces through their prayer, forces which they themselves then spiritually embody, the 'broken and despondent'⁸³ suppliants cling desperately to the altars and cry to be rescued. They are reminiscent of the hysterical chorus in *Seven Against Thebes*—only there, Aeschylus had them punished. In Sophocles' world, the gods are placed beyond reach and man thus loses what once was his primal source of strength. Humanity and the divine now lead separate existences and man does not believe with *unquestioning* sincerity that the gods can hear him or that they are anywhere near him. What was in Aeschylus' mythopoeic realm an intimate and natural connection between man and god is severed by Sophocles, who can longer find satisfaction in divine ambiguity. Like Oedipus, he has to solve everything, get to the bottom of everything—he has to find the truth and the truth now demands an *absolute* form. *Oedipus the King* inquires into and redefines the nature of epistemology in logos terms: "Zeus and Apollo know, they know [...] But whether a mere man can know the truth [...] there is no test, no certain proof" (561ff.).

In Aeschylus, man's truth is his own: realities shift, choruses waver, meanings multiply, and *all* of it is true, the whole complex *is* the truth. The gods amplify, and sanctify, and we suffer into *our* truth, which needs no verifying proof. In Sophocles' world, on the other hand, the "true meaning [...] is only revealed when it becomes part of an order that is beyond man and escapes him."⁸⁴ This unknowable place "beyond man" is now the sole reality,⁸⁵ and only here can something acquire the status of *real* truth. Faith is thus made to depend on external evidence, and the divine is exposed to

83. Stage directions, as suggested by Fagles in Sophocles, 'The three Theban plays', trans. Robert Fagles, London, Penguin Books, 1984, p. 159.

84. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 27. Vernant says this of tragedy in general; however, I cannot agree that it is a correct characterization of Aeschylus.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

cynical questioning. The “restlessly inquiring scientific spirit,”⁸⁶ which went on to destroy myth completely, began in this way to take hold of the Greeks. In Sophocles’ tragedy, as Nietzsche has said, “we are already breathing the air of a theoretical world.”⁸⁷ Mythos is fading. Thebes has been turned into a land of logos, and its gods into “riddles” (462) that must be solved. Man can no longer simply say ‘I believe’; he now has to say ‘*oida*’, ‘I know’.⁸⁸

The questions that Sophocles persisted in asking, Plato found answers for. Ambiguous riddles were solved and eternal solutions created. The “order that is beyond man” was now contained within the Forms. The gods were thus reduced to clear and logical proportions. Mythology, with its contradictions and irrationality, was dismissed as a crude form of understanding that was not able to endure the oncoming assault of philosophy. Plato declared war on the traditional poets of mythos, and replaced their Bible with his own.⁸⁹ He decided that “all the poets from Homer downwards have no grasp of truth” (*Republic*, 600e). Plato’s redefinition of religion said that God is perfect, just like the Republic is perfect, and is the cause “not of all things, but only of good” (380d). The poets’ stories of imperfect gods therefore had to be condemned as a “stupid mistake” (379d) and a “wicked lie” (391e) that must be banished from the state lest it should infect its citizens with immorality.

Contrary to what Castoriadis insinuates, Sophocles *is* religious but it is a different kind of religion: not one that eventually leads to non-religion, but one that leads to Platonic religion. The massive change that did indeed take place between Aeschylus and Sophocles did not, as Castoriadis argues, consist in man’s sudden secular awareness of his own self-creation, but rather in his ever-increasing demand for order in the world—in nature as well as in religion. Sophocles was a stepping stone towards Plato, and the latter completed the task of ensuring that man had ordered and conquered all that is “beyond man,” including the gods. Although the gods certainly could not be dominated quite as easily as the inferior natural world, which is no “match for man,” they could nevertheless be turned into perfectly good allies of mankind. The much lauded Greek “emancipation from myth” was thus instigated by a ‘pseudorational pseudomastery’ which had spilled over from its proper place in politics.

MAN, MEANING AND POLITICS

Aeschylus and Sophocles both actively participated in the Athenian democracy and through their tragedies espoused this particular political system as the answer to human ethics. However, whereas Aeschylus limited the ‘radical’ self-conscious self-creation to the autonomous running of society—that is, to the realm of politics, ethics, democracy—Sophocles wanted to extend the autonomy project much further. The change that took

86. Nietzsche, *The birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music*, p. 82.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

88. The name Oedipus, or *Oidipous*, resembles the Greek word *oida* (I know), “a theme that Sophocles hammers home with continual word-play.” Bernard Knox, introduction to Sophocles, ‘The three Theban plays’, p. 152.

89. See Desmond Lee, introduction to Plato, ‘The Republic’.

place in the short period of time between Aeschylus and Sophocles involved the *confusion* between politics and practically everything else. The order that was sought in nature and religion was nothing but a reflection of the man-made order that had revolutionized the Athenian political system. The “judging and choosing,” the rational ordering of laws and society, the rational mastery that is *rightly* exercised within the domain of ethics and politics, began to overstep their boundaries and now claimed to order and create not only laws but the whole of reality—nature, gods, significations, meanings, man.

According to Castoriadis, Sophoclean man taught himself; he gave himself everything that he has; he is reliant on himself and no one else—hence his brilliance. Castoriadis’ autonomy of the individual dictates that one cannot appeal to anything outside of the self. The ‘self’ in Castoriadis is composed of the “socially-fabricated” individual, which is the *conscious* self, that can and must at all times “judge and choose” what “relationship” it will have with its *psyche*, which is the *unconscious* “monad” self. This is the *reductio ad absurdum* basis of Castoriadis’ psychoanalysis, which is in effect simply a transposition of his politics onto the individual (or vice versa). His politics deals with the self-creating society which must judge and choose what form it will give to the world, and his psychoanalysis deals with the self-creating individual who must judge and choose what form he will give to his own psyche. The aims of both the individual and of society should be autonomy. The conscious self must be autonomous in its dealings with the unconscious self, just as the society must be autonomous in its dealings with the world. Why? Because in reality, the world and our psyche are in a state of Chaos—and Chaos is, according to Castoriadis, formless, groundless, meaningless, indeterminate void, abyss, nothingness. Their state of Chaos is why we must give our world and our psyche form, and the meanings which we judge and choose for them. Nevertheless, however, we must remember that “at the roots of the world, beyond the familiar landscape, Chaos always reigns supreme,”⁹⁰ and “the socially fabricated individual [...] is never but a thin film covering the Chaos, the Abyss, the Groundlessness of the psyche itself.”⁹¹ Castoriadis recognised that humans have a desperate *need* to have some sort of *guarantee* for their meanings, but he insisted also that they have to be aware that there is no such thing, that their meanings are, in fact, without any ground. He says: “a democratic society knows, has to know, that there is no guaranteed signification, that it lives over the Chaos, that it is itself a Chaos that must give itself its form, one that is never settled once and for all. It is on the basis of this knowledge that it creates meaning and signification.”⁹²

Since there is no ultimate foundation to anything, one must constantly and self-consciously be prepared to change in order to authentically reflect the reality of Chaos. Our meanings must always be completely replaceable, alterable, unstable. We have a “relationship” to ourselves. We are “fragments” and so is the world. But, alas, we are free. ‘Meaning’, or what Castoriadis means by this trickiest of words, can here only

90. Castoriadis, ‘The Greek *Polis* and the Creation of Democracy’, p. 273.

91. Castoriadis, *World in fragments : writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination*, p. 311.

92. Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘The Dilapidation of the West’, in Anon (ed.), *The Rising Tide of Insignificance (The Big Sleep)*, 2003, p. 84.

ever be a logical construct that is defined, determined, clearly ordered, decided—not once and for all, as is the case in heteronomous individuals and societies, but for a certain period of time. These constantly altered and alterable new norms, meanings, realities, are each time fixed. They can be removed and replaced with new realities and meanings, but each new case is treated, albeit momentarily, as though it were the sole one. This is the cognitive closure that even autonomous societies can never escape from. Here “truth is created as the perpetual movement of doing away with the closure of meaning (the movement is perpetual because the closure can never be eliminated).”⁹³ And because the closure can never be eliminated, it is the task of the autonomous individual to ensure that its “walls” are constantly shaken.⁹⁴ But even if we fail to shake these walls ourselves—that is, if we slip into heteronomy, Chaos will take care of things: “This labour of signification is [...] perpetually menaced [...] by the Chaos it encounters, by the Chaos it itself dredges up.”⁹⁵ Our reassuring self-created significations, meanings, norms, identities, can only ever temporarily “cover over” the underlying Chaos of the world and of our psyche. In the end, however, the Chaos will always seep through to “menace” us.

Sophocles shows us something analogous in *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus, who confidently believes that he is in control of his life and identity, and that he has his significations all figured out, presses on boldly with his investigation, not realising all the while that by uncovering the mystery he will utterly destroy himself and reality as he knows it. The prophet Tiresias says to him: “Are you not the best at unravelling mysteries? [...] yet it was just that fortune that undid you” (44off.). Oedipus unleashes the Chaos, which had quietly been hidden away all this time, and his cognitive closure is finally forced open. He is ruined. His closed significations and meanings that had been set up as a defence against the Chaos—this is what Castoriadis insists our significations are for us—did not suffice.

In Aeschylus, on the other hand, ‘meaning’ has an entirely different status. It is never treated as though it were simply a construct erected by man as protection against impending Chaos.⁹⁶ Aeschylus’ meanings (and not just the *definition* of his *words*, but his meanings of ‘life’, of the world, of nature, fate, man, the gods—all the things Castoriadis calls the imaginary significations) are always aware of the Chaos, they are open to it and can accommodate it. His meanings do not defend against the Chaos but carry it within themselves. While Sophocles’ heroes desperately search for clarity and cohesion, while they urgently need to discover, uncover, and know the hidden and mysterious ‘truth’—the ‘true’ and ‘real’ meaning of their gods, fate, and identity—which is determined by external facts and evidence and revealed like a detective story, Aeschylus presents us with a fluid reality that is shaped by an indeterminate multiplicity of forces and meanings.

93. Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘The Social Historical: Mode of Being, Problems of Knowledge’, *Figures of the thinkable*, trans. Helen Arnold, Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 228.

94. *Ibid.*

95. Castoriadis, *World in fragments : writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination*, p. 313.

96. ‘Chaos’ is here to be limited to the indeterminate, ineffable, mythopoeic, unknowable, alogical, amoral; as opposed to some of the other many descriptions and formulations Castoriadis gives of Chaos.

There is no one ‘real’ truth that we must logically question our way to: there are many, and they all extend well beyond the imposed limits of logos.

In Sophocles, fate, nature, and the gods are set up as entities opposed to, and usually hostile to, mankind: hence their need to be controlled or conquered or explained (away). Sophocles begins questioning the gods because he is anxiously searching for the same clear knowable order in religion as he has available to him in his *polis*’ rational man-made political system. In the same way, when his heroes demand that their prophets explicitly reveal their fate and identity to them, they are searching for a clear order within themselves. And when they proudly declare that they are “self-taught” and have given themselves everything they have, they are insisting that they are in control of themselves. Sophocles shows man’s supreme discomfort with the state of Chaos, and his pitiful attempts to escape it. His heroes restlessly strive to conquer and explain Chaos away by asserting their autonomous self-sufficiency. And it is precisely for these “high-towering hopes” that Sophocles has his heroes brutally punished by the end of the tragedy.

Whereas Aeschylus presents us with a solution—a positive and hopeful ethics of the new *dēmokratía*, Sophocles dogmatically dwells on the punishment of man for sins he has committed unknowingly. The latter does have his chorus sing some conclusive words of wisdom—about the dangers of *hubris*—but overall it is a conservative effort that does little more than repeat what have for him become the clichés of tradition. Contrary to what Castoriadis argues, it is Aeschylus, not Sophocles, who is the truly radical thinker and whose tragedies epitomise the ancient meaning of human autonomy.

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